

A WHOLE NEW WORLD: A STUDY ON THE IMPACT THE DISNEY
THEATRICAL GROUP HAS MADE ON BROADWAY THEATRE AND TIMES
SQUARE OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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December, 2017

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DEDICATION

For David. I couldn't have done this without your constant encouragement and faith. Thank you.

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CHAPTER I

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THEATRE IN TIMES SQUARE

In her book *Times Square Roulette*, Lynne B. Sagalyn gives credit to two major events in the late 1880s which solidified the distinction of Times Square as the national hub for business and entertainment. These two events--the introduction of electricity and the building of New York's Interborough Rapid Transit Company--turned Longacre Square (a less than remarkable strip catering to horse dealers, carriages, and stables) into a thriving cultural crossroads, christened with a brand new name. The new electricity enabled theatres to illuminate their marquees and draw massive crowds with their luminous spectacle. The Times Square subway station, which is a stop on nearly every transit line, transported nearly five million people in the first year alone (38). By 1927, 85 theatres running 264 shows spanned the blocks between Sixth and Eighth Avenue, with 42nd Street reigning supreme (33). In *The Devil's Playground*, James Traub describes this thriving square:

Times Square...became New York's zone of popular culture and entertainment because it was so readily accessible to the millions who lived and worked in the city, or who were visiting from out of town; and because this pleasure district occupied the center of the city that was itself the center of the nation's culture, Times Square came to be seen as the capital of fun, the place that instructed the nation in the fine art of play and furnished the dreams of young people languishing in what the great Broadway columnist Franklin P. Adams always called "Dullsboro." (xvi)

But Broadway audiences of the 1920's were not quite ready for productions of substance. Gag shows, "dopey" musicals, and reviews were in vogue. The chorus girls of the Ziegfeld Follies and other similar shows dazzled male audiences and kept them coming back for more (Traub 57). Late night lobster houses grew alongside the thriving theatres, with many actors and theatre patrons staying out all night eating, drinking, and reveling. It was, indeed, an era of glitz, girls, and merriment.

But the thriving square eventually caused unforeseen trouble to the numerous theatres in its neighborhood. Rent and real estate prices soared along with demand, and theatre owners found it nearly impossible to bring in enough revenue to cover their expenses. New theatres were able to sign deals to be built into a restaurant or hotel to help ease the financial burden. But the older theatres either closed down or transitioned into movie houses. According to Sagalyn, "movies merged extraordinarily well with the nation's demographics because they occupied an economic niche between audiences for whom theatre was too expensive, vaudeville too crude, and nickelodeons too dark, dirty, and cheap" (Traub 41).

The Great Depression eventually brought the revelry to a standstill. The theatres surrounding 42nd Street, struggling to survive, became houses for 25-cent peep shows, risque movies, and burlesque. Prostitutes began showing up on street corners. The successes of these adult amusements led many small businesses to follow suit by selling erotic merchandise. By 1937, the only theatre

on 42nd Street that was still showing plays, the New Amsterdam, finally shut its doors to theatre and reopened as a movie house (Traub 91).

As the 1940's rolled into the 1950's, and an increasingly large number of people stayed home to watch television, one thing kept a few of the legitimate Times Square theatres going: the Broadway musical. Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Cole Porter were just a few of the musical leaders to produce wildly successful shows. Not only were these musicals more popular than straight plays, the showtunes ended up on the lips of the American public. These songs were re-recorded by the most celebrated artists of the day and could be heard incessantly on both radio and television. This familiarity drove audiences to these increasingly popular musicals and left them humming long after they left the theatre (Traub 106).

But while these theatres offered fun, glamorous musicals fit for the entire family, the theatres-turned-movie houses of 42nd Street catered to a different crowd. The films, called "grinders", shown in these houses were dark, sleazy, explicitly sexual, and were aimed at a mostly male demographic. It was cheap entertainment that brought in a very diverse audience, and many locals considered this evolution of the street to be an endearing progression of the city they loved, rather than a degradation (Sagalyn 43).

By the 1960s, pornography was the booming business of Times Square due to several Supreme Court decisions to protect "explicit sexual materials" (Traub 119). Mark Jacobson called 42nd Street "New York's drive-in circuit," explaining that, "You can't make every movie theater like Cinema One. If the city

is really interested in the occult vibe in this country, they ought to nationalize Forty-second Street as a center for sleazological studies” (qtd. in Sagalyn 45). Crime became rampant in the area, unable to be curtailed by the overwhelmed local police force. Crack cocaine and other drugs infiltrated Times Square in the mid 1980s, and all hope of returning the city to its former glory days seemed lost.

Small redevelopment efforts were begun but were quickly crushed because the adult entertainment industry was raking in such large sums. “The block is so tough you have to be either crazy or courageous to sink a lot of money into it,” said a representative from Mayor Ed Koch’s office in December 1981 (Young).

In February of that same year, a \$2.6 billion redevelopment plan was announced by Mayor Koch for the Times Square area which included new buildings, offices, and renovations of the theatres on 42nd street. The plan, involving eminent domain and enormous tax breaks for new developers and tenants, met with dozens of lawsuits and was eventually brought to a halt by the recession of 1991. 42nd Street had finally been condemned. The president of the 42nd Street Development Project, Rebecca Robertson, devoted her energy during the recession to re-working the plan into one “that reconnected with the “razzmatazz” of Times Square’s past by emphasizing entertainment, big garish signs, an eclectic mix of tenants and glassier, flashier office towers, with lobbies that seemed to flow onto the sidewalk rather than wall it off” (Bagli). This newly revised plan, called *42nd Street Now!*, was well received by the public, and everything was set to move forward. But, because the designs and concept

allowed the new tenants of 42nd Street to dictate the specific activities that would be permitted on the block, and since the area was geared for entertainment, Robertson was tasked with procuring an entertainment “king” to lead the revolution (Traub 167).

Ironically, the Walt Disney Company had already begun searching for a stage for their live theatrical productions. The company had spent years debating the prospect of venturing into legitimate theatre, but considered it too risky in light of the recent Euro Disney disaster (Rose). While the idea had been mentioned to him a few times, Michael Eisner, the then-chairman of Disney, saw great risk in moving into New York because of the potential outcomes associated with merging the Disney brand with the area’s altogether tawdry and rough reputation (Traub 168). However, when New York Times theatre critic Frank Rich deemed Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* as the best musical of 1991, Eisner swooned and began moving forward with plans for the stage.

When architect and Disney board member Robert Stern eventually walked Eisner through the abandoned New Amsterdam Theatre, Eisner recognized the enormous potential associated with locating the new company branch, Disney Theatrical Group, on 42nd Street:

...armed with flashlights and hardhats, the two ventured into the abandoned theater. They stumbled into something out of the *Indiana Jones* ride at Disneyland: grand hallways reduced to a water-soaked ruin, stairways half buried in rubble, mushrooms growing out of the floor, a soaring playhouse inhabited by birds. Through the gloom they could make out something that had been described in its day as "a glance into fairyland." Eisner was enthralled: "I could see what a spectacular place it had been and could be," he says now. (Rose)

That brief exploration of the New Amsterdam was the beginning of a relationship between Disney and Times Square. From that day forward, with Mickey Mouse pioneering the way, the Disney Theatrical Group has greatly impacted both the redevelopment of Times Square and the Broadway theatre scene through technological advances, hiring practices, family values, and marketing to a younger demographic.

CHAPTER II

DISNEY'S INTRODUCTION TO BROADWAY

By this point, musical theatre had already begun to make a comeback in the New York entertainment scene. Michael Bennett's *A Chorus Line* had just completed its fifteen year stint, making it the longest running Broadway show to date. Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods* had already introduced new magical twists on old fairy tales. Andrew Lloyd Webber, along with Cameron Mackintosh, had just ushered in the British mega-musical invasion with *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, and *Miss Saigon*. But these hit shows appealed mainly to adult audiences residing in the New York Metropolitan area who already enjoyed the theatre.

The Real Estate Deal

With mega-musicals in full swing a few blocks away, 42nd Street remained untouched. Word had spread that Michael Eisner was interested in the New Amsterdam. The news of Disney's proposed venture onto the stage was met with widespread debate. *Times* writer Frank Rich called 42nd Street "the least Disneyesque thoroughfare in America," going on to praise the Disney Theatrical Group: "By relighting the New Amsterdam, Disney will attract more tenants to other dark theatres on the street and more customers to the other

struggling theaters” (Rich). In an article for the *Houston Chronicle* in 1993, Everett Evans wrote “The Walt Disney Co. has already taken over the world. What does it want with the theatre?” His comments summarized the larger debate:

With their vast popularity, Disney properties transplanted to the stage might encourage families to disconnect their videos and re-engage live entertainment. That could be a key to developing future audiences for theater of all stripes.

Then again, theater might be just another outlet for familiar Disney properties, from Snow White to Aladdin. One can anticipate the formula: cinematic re-issue every seven years, video release the year after, stage version two years later.

As controversy persisted, the Disney Theatrical Group continued to pursue the risky move with negotiations over the renovation of the New Amsterdam. In the Disney theme parks, every environmental aspect of the customer experience is completely controlled, so without a way to reproduce this experience on a New York city block, Eisner attempted to reduce the risk factor by seeking the right of first refusal for all properties on the street. The proposal was ultimately denied, but he eventually succeeded in persuading state officials to eradicate all the sex shops from the block and sign leasing agreements with two “nationally recognized and reputable companies who are actively engaged in the entertainment business” (Sagalyn 353). Madame Tussauds Wax Museum and AMC Theaters stepped in to fill this requirement. When all the pages had finally been signed, the renovations proceeded at full speed.

In what was perceived by many as an overnight transformation, 42nd Street took on new life. With the promise of Disney moving in and the economy

finally recovering from the recent market crash, other major players such as Westin Hotel, the B. B. King Blues Club and Grill, Condé Nast, retail outlets and additional movie theaters also chose to join the block. In 1995, The 42nd Street Development project signed additional agreements for the redevelopment of the northwestern end of 42nd street, as well as the Liberty and Empire theatres. The Apollo and Lyric theatres were merged as one large venue. By the end of the year, history was made as The New Victory Theatre (formerly the Republic Theatre), located across the street from the New Amsterdam, was re-opened as New York's first non-profit theatre for children and families, most likely the last thing people expected to see on this once dark and sinister street. "Before Disney's hard commitment, the possibilities of West 42nd Street were, as it is said in the real estate business, 'all options.' As long-time UDC-director William L. Mack concluded, 'Disney gave value to these options'"(Sagalyn 368).

Cleaning the Neighborhood

While it seemed Rebecca Robertson had found her hero there was still some concern about the environmental conditions surrounding Disney's new home. In 1990, just three years before Disney signed their leasing agreement, the annual murder rate in New York City had climbed to an all-time high of 2,245 total murders. Overall crime (including murder, rape, robbery, assault, burglary, and larceny) stood at a towering 527,257 incidents (NYC.gov). When Mayor Rudy Giuliani took office in 1994, just as the city threatened to careen into violent chaos, he hired William Bratton as NYPD Police Commissioner, and together they began an era of "quality-of-life policing." Using this approach and aided by

the newly developed Comstat (a management tool for greater efficiency and organization), officers were encouraged to “make arrests for low-level crimes such as prostitution and minor drug transactions that, when left unpunished, create a climate of lawlessness that encourages criminals to act on their darker impulses, leading to ever more serious crime” (Stern).

As a result, felonies reported on 42nd Street alone dropped from 2,300 in 1984 to just 60 in 1995. Crime statistics for the general New York City area also greatly decreased between 1993 and 2001, coinciding with the end of Giuliani’s term. The number of annual murders fell from 1,927 to 649. Overall incidents in 2001 totaled just 99,823 as opposed to 430,460 in 1993 (NYC.gov).

While order was gradually restored, Mayor Giuliani turned his attention to the sex-related businesses in Times Square. As part of their negotiations, he had personally promised Michael Eisner that all sex shops would be removed from 42nd Street. Eisner recounted the conversation:

I had a little concern about the adjacent nightlife, and he (Giuliani) looked me in the eye and he said, "It'll be gone," and I said, "Mr. Mayor, you know there is the American Civil Liberties Union, and I mean, they're just not gone." He said, "Look me in the eye." And I said, "What?" He said, "Look me in the eye." I said, "Okay." He said, "They will be gone." Scared me. I guess(ed) they were going to be gone. So that was that, and we said yes. (Hill, “Looking Back”)

Giuliani took the new zoning laws even further. Times Square was obviously moving toward an era of real estate, tourism, and family friendly entertainment. The mayor understood that in order to bring in the tenants and tourists the city needed, the adult stores would need to either close or relocate. The rise of the Internet and its easily accessible content had already driven many

adult store owners to close their doors forever. The new zoning laws would drive out the rest. Years later Giuliani was quoted as saying:

It didn't happen by accident, it didn't happen by wishing they went away...It happened based on a very well-organized campaign, a study demonstrating the impact of pornography on neighborhoods, an intense battle in court that nobody thought we would win, and we won. And most importantly, the pornographers lost and they were chased out of Times Square. (CBSNews.com)

Disney's Debut

As renovations continued on the New Amsterdam, Disney's first fully staged musical, *Beauty and the Beast*, premiered at the Palace Theatre in New York on Monday April 18th, 1994. The show was met with overwhelmingly critical reviews, but audiences loved it. According to the *New York Times*, ticket sales for the new musical hit \$603,494 the very next day, breaking the Broadway box office record for ticket sales on the day after an opening night. Until then, the only other musical that made more money in a single day was *The Phantom of the Opera* on its premiere in 1987 ("Beast"). After this triumphant opening week, one thing became very clear: Disney was a hit in New York. Michael Eisner had made all the right moves. "Classy (à la Ziegfeld) but accessible (à la Disney) was the formula as Disney Theatricals anchored its corporate entity in Times Square" (Brater et al. 162), and audiences wholeheartedly approved.

A New Square

In May 1997, the newly renovated New Amsterdam Theatre reopened with a concert production of *King David*, an oratorio by Alan Menken and Tim Rice. Although the concert itself received less than stellar reviews, Mayor Giuliani

referred to the event as the “‘the turning point’ in the revival of Times Square (Weber). The *LA Times* referred to the theatre as “a \$36-million model of enlightened urban renewal, grand theatrical intimacy and general fantasy fabulousness” (Winer-Bernheimer).

This new fabulousness glimmered with the fulfilled hope New York Governor Mario Cuomo had once planted in the hearts of the city’s locals. In the mid 1980s he had referred to Times Square as “a sewer and everybody knew it, right in the heart of New York City.” He went on to say, “Now we’re going to get rid of all that filth and 42nd Street is going to come back. People are going to bring their kids in here. Can you imagine? It’s the beginning of a whole new era for the City” (Hill, “Looking Back”). Indeed, by 1997, the sex shops were gone, crime had been drastically reduced, family-friendly entertainment flourished, and there was shopping and dining for all. 42nd Street rose from the ashes of its sordid past and began to shine.

Just prior to the reopening of the New Amsterdam, New York Governor George Pataki was quoted as saying that the newly unveiled theatre would be the centerpiece of the 42nd Street revival, and the street would soon become “the number one tourist attraction in America” (Viagas). His predictions were accurate. Visitors to the area have been unstoppable ever since. Between 1982 and 2015, the yearly number of tourists traveling to New York City grew from 16.9 million (Fowler) to 58.5 million visitors (NYCandCompany.org). According to *World Atlas*, Times Square was the second most visited tourist destination in the world in 2016 (Wee). In 2015, domestic and international visitors spent \$42.2

billion dollars in the city. During the 1992-93 Broadway theatre season, the highest grossing week came in at \$8.8 million. In 1998, the year after *Lion King's* premiere, revenue topped out at \$15.7 million (BroadwayLeague.com).

In a recent article on CNN.com entitled "When Times Square was Sleazy," Tim Tompkins, president of the Times Square Alliance, summarizes the drastic revival: "The problem used to be that you couldn't get through Times Square without getting mugged or killed, and then by the 2000s, the problem was you couldn't get through Times Square because it was so crowded."

CHAPTER III

SOURCES OF SUCCESS

As illustrated in the previous chapter, the cleanup of Times Square had a large impact on tourism and revenue. Not only did Disney's new endeavor help transform a city, it also began to revolutionize theatre audience demographics. When *Beauty and the Beast* premiered in 1994, it innocently joined the Broadway lineup amidst shows of more mature themes. *Passion*, *Grease*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *The Best Little Whorehouse Goes Public* were all drawing adult audiences just a few blocks away. But with crime rates continuing to fall and the economy beginning to recover, families were flocking back to Times Square. For families looking for a kid-friendly entertainment treat, there was only one clear option: Disney.

In 1998, the year after *The Lion King's* debut, the *New York Times* reported that the under-18 theatre crowd had doubled from 1991 to 1997. In 2006, the League of American Theaters and Producers reported that "the proportion of Broadway theatergoers under the age of 18 rose from 4 percent in 1980 to a peak of 11.6 percent in the 2000-01 season" (Robertson, "Magical Moments").

The reasons for this impact might seem obvious: popular children's movies turned into a live spectacle would, of course, attract families. But the Disney Theatrical Group also performed unprecedented experiments with marketing tactics, ticket prices, and purchase flexibility, developing successful sales practices that would serve them for years to come.

Marketing Strategy

There are three main Broadway marketing companies in New York City: Serino Coyne Inc., SpotCo, and Eliran Murphy Group. Nancy Coyne, of Serino Coyne, is credited with the creation of "Disney on Broadway," a campaign advertising a rotating trio of Disney musicals so that a less popular show can "ride on the coattails" of the more successful ones. "Essentially it's another way of saying, 'If you liked this Disney Broadway show, you'll love these other two!'" (NYTix.com). While this isn't a new marketing strategy, it was the first of its kind on Broadway.

In an interview for *NBC News*, Coyne (who was once a child performer) explained her understanding and passion for theatre which drives her success:

We are the original reality art form...There is a live person performing for you at 8 o'clock tonight. By 11 o'clock, it's going to be over. You can't rewind. You can't listen to it over and over again. Therefore, you have to stay engaged. A part of your memory is on that isn't on when you are watching a movie or television. People remember Broadway shows in an unbelievable way. They save their Playbills. It's still a special occasion in a world where there are no more special occasions.

Included in that interview, Thomas Schumacher stated, "We all have a circle of people we trust, and I trust Nancy...She has vast experience — more

than 20 years in fact —and a vast knowledge of Broadway and advertising, and she has wisely guided me” (Kuchwara).

In addition to packaging Disney’s shows together, Coyne and her team have also made efforts to market these shows toward audiences of all ages. In a 2014 interview with *Vulture Magazine*, Schumacher confirmed that while only 30% of tickets purchased for Disney shows include a child, each production is geared toward reaching a very diverse age range. Speaking particularly of *Aladdin*, Schumacher illustrates this wide audience:

...we produced the stage version 22 years after the film version was made, and an entire generation grew up loving that property. So if you were 12 when you saw it, you’re 34 now, right? You’re coming. So the theatre’s full of these kind of Brooklyn hipsters that are coming, but if you’re the 45-65 crowd, you’re coming because we’re the closest thing to the Ziegfeld Follies you’re ever gonna see, and this big, spectacular show that’s very grown up and interesting. We produced a show that anyone can come to. (Horn)

When the market crashed in 2008, ticket sales for all three Disney shows (*The Little Mermaid*, *The Lion King*, and *Mary Poppins*) drastically fell. Running three shows at once was enormously expensive, and fewer families were willing to spend such large amounts on tickets in the midst of an unstable economy. Theatre producer Stuart Orken, former executive vice president of Disney Theatrical, told Patrick Healy of *The New York Times*, “A bad economy is a bad time to be competing against yourself, which is a situation Disney inevitably faces” (“How to Sell”).

Shortly after, the decision was made to “unbundle” the three shows to allow for separate marketing schemes and strategies. Each show took on a life of

its own. For instance, *Mary Poppins* became a beacon of hope in an uncertain economy. Television ads featured audience members remarking on how optimistic and happy they felt while watching the show. It was a campaign around escapism at a time when families really needed a few moments to forget their troubles.

The Theatrical Group's marketing team also knows when to call it quits. While most of their shows have been successes, a few were not well received. With high weekly running costs in multiple theatres, Disney continues to make wise business decisions by dropping the curtain on a dwindling show before the audience has had time to lose interest.

Innovative Ticket Pricing

Rising to the top with staying power requires both intuition and science. When *Beauty and the Beast* opened, tickets were competitively priced amongst other musicals that year, ranging from \$20 to \$65. Tickets for kids were not discounted, and only ages 4+ were allowed in the theatre.

Later in 1997, *The Lion King* roared to life, winning six Tony Awards and major critical acclaim. During the first week of performances, the most expensive ticket sold for \$75. In April of 2017, the highest ticket sold at \$225. This same month, just down the street, *The Book of Mormon* was selling tickets for \$477, and *Hamilton* tickets topped out at \$849. Disney has made an intentional (and unusual) decision to limit ticket prices to \$227. "Doing so makes *The Lion King* relatively affordable for large groups and families, lessens the chance of buyer's

remorse leading to bad word of mouth and offers room to raise prices over the long term, according to producers who assess the Broadway industry” (Russell).

In fact, despite selling much more affordable tickets, *The Lion King* recently became the top-grossing show on Broadway in 2013 -- sixteen years after its opening. The answer to how Disney marketers achieved this feat: dynamic pricing. This process involves a computer algorithm which takes a look at every seat in the theatre and recommends the highest price an audience member is likely to pay for that seat. Many Broadway shows have utilized dynamic pricing, but Disney has been heralded as the leader:

While other shows also employ this dynamic pricing system to raise seat prices during tourist-heavy holiday weeks, only Disney has reached the level of sophistication achieved in the airline and hotel industries by continually using its algorithm to calibrate prices based on demand and ticket purchasing patterns. (Russell)

Using this system, Disney has stopped charging one overarching price for a section of seats. Instead, they raise prices based on the data, and buyers can peruse an interactive seating map to pick their location in the theatre. While it's widely believed that Disney is selling more top-price tickets than most other theatres, buyers are happily choosing the pricier options because they are still far less of an investment for what they believe to be a sure thing. Since 1999, *The Lion King* has continued to hold one of the top three grossing spots each year, coming second only to *Wicked*, *Billy Elliot*, and most recently in 2016, *Hamilton*. Disney's *Aladdin* has held one of the top five spots since its premiere in 2014.

Purchasing Flexibility

In addition to setting an intention to keep shows affordable, Disney has also used a number of strategies to experiment with flexible ticket sales including discount programs, catering to children and families, and offering certain exchanges. During the aforementioned 2008 recession, Disney began offering a winter discount program for their three shows. The program was called “Kids Go Free,” and it allowed families to receive a free children’s ticket with every full price ticket purchase for weeknight performances. This discount ran from December 2008 to March 2009 and was advertised as a holiday gift. The idea, attributed to David Schrader, was that full theatres enable audiences to have a better experience, which keeps them coming back for more (Healy, “How to Sell”).

After “Kids Go Free” wrapped up, Disney launched a new discount campaign offering a \$15 companion ticket to anyone who purchased a regularly priced ticket. At this time, ticket sales for all three shows were down by at least six percent, and the discount applied to all weeknight shows as well as specific sections of the theatre in which attendance was often sparse. Just one month after the companion discount ended, a closing date was announced for *The Little Mermaid*. *Mary Poppins* continued to run for another four years.

In 2014, Disney announced a first-of-its-kind ticket exchange policy for *The Lion King* and *Aladdin*. The policy “allows ticket holders, for any reason whatsoever, to change the date they see the show until two hours in advance of their scheduled performance. There is no limit to the number of times the tickets

may be exchanged” (Gans). For a small \$12 fee, audience members now have the freedom to change their minds or plans. Concerning this unheard-of policy, Schrader made this statement:

Attending a Broadway show is about escaping, so ticket-buying should accommodate people’s hectic, unpredictable schedules. Our aim is to empower guests with an unprecedented level of flexibility so that they can make their plans in advance knowing there are options if they need to change their schedule. (Gans)

In an industry where a theatre ticket is considered a non-refundable commitment, Disney offers its audiences a fresh ease within this new policy, as well as further incentive to see additional productions. The company also has the organizational power to stay on top of these constant fluctuations, and is likely making an additional profit from the exchange fees.

It is because of these marketing and pricing strategies, as well as their offer of pure and wholesome kid-friendly entertainment, that Disney has played such a huge part in bringing families back to Times Square. According to one writer for *New York Show Tickets*:

Disney has, in fact, virtually cornered the market on children’s theatre on Broadway. Either because the other Broadway producers have not yet figured out how to appeal to kids, or because they’re just afraid of competing with the Disney behemoth, few other Broadway producers have even attempted to bring a kid-oriented shows to Broadway. That means that almost any family with young children wanting to take in a Broadway show have no choice but to see a Disney musical. And that’s a strategy you can take to the bank. (NYTix.com)

Beauty and the Beast

Looking at the statistics, it’s clear that Disney’s marketing efforts and pricing strategies have helped to ensure financial success at the box office. In

2013, *The Lion King* became Broadway's first show to make \$1 billion in cumulative gross. With 24 global productions, and since becoming the 3rd longest playing Broadway musical of all time, over 90 million people have experienced the show. *Aladdin*, still running three years after its opening, has made over \$250 million (BroadwayLeague.com). Even the less well-received productions like *The Little Mermaid* and *Tarzan* are still enjoying limited engagements and reworkings in different areas of the world. What is it that has made these productions so successful, especially years after the initial excitement around their premieres has ended?

Beauty and the Beast was an enormous risk from the beginning. Being the company's first animated feature turned live-action Broadway production, there were many uncertainties. Why would people want to pay such high prices to see something they could watch on their VCR at home? Would audiences be able to relate to a bunch of humans singing and dancing while dressed as larger-than-life household objects? How could the creative team deepen both characters and story while maintaining the charm and familiarity of the original? Would this lengthier production be too long for kids?

What the team put together was an epic spectacle that ushered Broadway onto a new level of family entertainment. Regardless of whether or not the critics fully appreciated its foray into the legitimate theatre scene, Disney opened up a new door to a place where both adults and children could come to find entertainment of the highest caliber. This caliber, however, came with an expensive price tag.

It cost producers what would now be the equivalent of \$17.4 million to make *Beauty*, setting a new standard for audience expectations and placing it in the top five most expensive productions of all time. The show includes pyrotechnics, rain, thunder, fog, an entire fleet of mechanical set pieces, and an onstage beast-to-man transformation. The original composer of the film, Alan Menken, was brought back along with a new lyricist, Tim Rice, to write additional songs in an attempt to further develop the central characters. The Tony Award winning costumes, designed by Ann Hould-Ward, were flamboyant, mesmerizing, and extravagant. There was also, of course, the freshly renovated New Amsterdam theatre which housed the whole thing. To put it simply, Disney spared no expense and managed to reap all the rewards.

David Richards, of the *New York Times*, reviewed the production and called it “a sightseer’s delight,” adding that “family audiences tired of prancing felines are apt to find this cause for celebration.” After all, Disney had given families exactly what they longed for: safer New York City streets, pure and virtuous entertainment, and top quality escapism via a nostalgic fairy tale. The box office continued to report record breaking sales, and audiences couldn’t get enough. What the show was missing, however, and what critics actually agreed on, was any room to breathe, ponder, and imagine. Richards went on to explain: “Everything has been painstakingly and copiously illustrated. There is no room for dreaming, no quiet tucked-away moment that might encourage a poetic thought. For an evening that puts forth so much, *Beauty and the Beast* has amazingly little resonance.” Jeremy Gerard of *Variety* wrote, “...a human form is

exactly what has eluded the Disney folks who assembled this show, which in the end feels bloated, padded, gimmick-ridden, tacky and, despite the millions, utterly devoid of imagination.” While Disney had a box office smash which truly began a new era of family-friendly theatrical entertainment, they still hadn’t won over every heart, so Thomas Schumacher began searching for their next move.

The Lion King

In the foreward to Julie Taymor’s book, *The Lion King: Pride Rock on Broadway*, Schumacher describes how Disney’s biggest hit took shape. Ironically, he had once told Michael Eisner that turning *The Lion King* into a stage musical was “the worst idea I had ever heard” (Taymor 14). His eventual decision to move forward by hiring Taymor as director of the production was quite possibly his own best idea. Taymor was unfamiliar with the film before she was brought on, having spent the previous years in Asia working in avant-garde, experimental theatre and puppetry. However, her training in these areas proved to be exactly what the show needed. She took her own background, skills, experiences, and knowledge and told the story through her own eyes.

While *Beauty and the Beast* seemed purely mechanical and literal, much of Taymor’s vision was symbolic and metaphorical, leaving the audience room to fill in the gaps. She employed methods that some called “exquisitely simple” to create the African plains onstage (Moore). Strips of fabric were used to create a rising sun, shadows and light played significant roles in forcing perspective, actors blended in and out of the landscape, and each person was visible regardless of the size of his or her costume.

The challenge was to create the theatrical image that one would want of the animal world and yet not lose the humanity of the human performers by putting people in animal costumes. Therefore, instead of hiding the inner workings, like in *Beauty*, Taymor made them impossible to ignore. “To me, that’s what theater is about...It’s about exposing the techniques, and that’s what makes it magical” (Breslauer).

The Lion King was very well received. Audiences of all ages were blown away by the spectacle of the production, gaping in wonder as lifesize elephants meandered past them to the stage and colorful birds flew in the air above. Taymor breathed new life into this familiar and dear story, and even critics agreed that her contribution to the larger theatre scene was monumental. Ben Brantley, of *The New York Times*, gave his honest review of the production:

The Lion King remains an important work in a way that "Beauty and the Beast" simply is not. Ms. Taymor has introduced a whole new vocabulary of images to the Broadway blockbuster...it offers a refreshing and more sophisticated alternative to the standard panoply of special effects that dominate most tourist-oriented shows today. Seen purely as a visual tapestry, there is simply nothing else like it. (“Cub Comes of Age”).

Fintan O’Toole, of the *New York Daily News*, wrote in his review:

For what you get here is a drawing-together of all of the inventions that the pioneers of 20th-century theater have struggled to perfect. Modern dance, puppets, light, silhouettes, song, music, color, clowning, all blend into the mix. Hollywood panache and Broadway pizzazz are here. But so too are the lonely, odd experimentalists who have worked over decades to develop new ways of making the stage into a magical realm.

John Stefaniu, the show’s associate director, agreed:

Julie’s legacy is that she pushes actors to breathe life into the story using their own voice, with clarity and with heart and with truth. In essence, she

pushes storytelling up a notch. It's not just children's theater. It's live theater. 'The Lion King' is a story not for kids, but for everyone. (Moore)

Disney had found its darling: a spectacular family-friendly show that also impressed the legitimate theatre crowd with its imagination and innovation. Ten years after its first previews, the cast opened the 2008 Tony Awards with a stunning performance of *The Circle of Life*. Still running strong in 2016, the production became the highest grossing entertainment title of all time, having earned over \$6.2 billion. "We're humbled by this milestone, a feat that can be explained in two words: Julie Taymor," said Schumacher in an interview with *The Guardian*. "Her vision, continued commitment to the show and uncommon artistry account for this extraordinary success" (Treuman).

Other Hits

On a high, Disney moved forward with three new movie-animation musicals over the next eight years: *Mary Poppins*, *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid*. With each show, the creative teams sought to push the technical envelope further. Whether or not these pushes were in the right direction, they are worthy of note for their innovation and creativity.

In *Mary Poppins*, the outstanding scenic design, as well as never before seen choreography, were the highlights of the production. Disney partnered with Cameron Mackintosh to produce, and together they hired Irish designer Bob Crowley to dream up the sets and costumes. At the time, he was most well known for his Tony Award winning work on *Carousel*, *Aida*, *The History of Boys*, and *The Coast of Utopia*. For this new Disney production, Crowley designed a

life-sized doll house for the Banks family, perfectly capturing Edwardian London. The musical's action takes place on many levels of the family's large house, culminating in an epic tap dance number on the roof. Ben Brantley called the set "gloriously detailed" ("Meddler"). Jeremy McCarter said "the stage magic is really astonishing," ("Fly"). "The sets, as you would expect, are imaginative and complicated, an engineering feat to be sure," wrote Alan Bird for *The New York Theatre Guide*.

It is during the previously mentioned rooftop tap number that Matthew Bourne's choreography shines. In the scene, Bert, a chimney sweep, taps to the edge of the stage and then proceeds up the side of the proscenium. He then magically taps -- upside-down -- across the proscenium arch. Almost every serious critic mentioned this astonishing sequence in his or her review, with Michael Dale neatly summarizing it as "one of the most memorable moments of the season."

Crowley was also hired to design and direct *Tarzan* in 2006. While his directorial debut wasn't a huge success (more on this in chapter 5), the opening scene he created was something to behold. Crowley painted a ship onto a floor-to-ceiling sheet of silk so it would move and sway with the waves and lightning projected onto it. Inside the painted ship are two real actors portraying a husband and wife with a small baby. The ship is quickly sunk by the raging seas, and the three are shown tumbling into the waters as the ship disappears below. The projections morph into the murky depths of the sea as the little family struggles to swim to the surface. The audience views it from the perspective of being in the

ocean right beside them. When the couple makes it to the top of the proscenium, the lights dim. Suddenly the stage is cast in bright light, and the actors are lying on the back wall of the theatre, which is now the sandy beach. The audience is watching them from above as they begin to make their way up the beach (down the back wall) and into the edge of the jungle (the stage floor). As they transition into the jungle, the stage is quickly transformed into a world of green, with dozens of dangling vines hanging on all sides. It is a truly remarkable opening sequence.

With *The Little Mermaid*, it wasn't the original production that made such an impact as it was Disney's decision to admit, "We didn't get it right the first time. Let's try again." When the show about the spunky teenage mermaid-turned-human was raked through the mud by critics, proving far less successful than *The Lion King* or *Beauty and the Beast* for reasons which will be covered in the next chapter, Disney closed up shop. They then turned to Glenn Casale and gave him permission to rework and make changes. Casale had worked on *Beauty* for a 2004 Boston production, giving the story a darker side.

He threw out inconsequential songs and added a few, made huge changes to costumes and set design, and ultimately created a much deeper, enjoyable, and successful theatrical experience. This modified production opened in the Netherlands in 2012. Casale went on to rework several additional *Mermaid* productions in the States, and all his work culminated into the brand new version which Disney now licenses to regional and professional theatres (Hill, "How Glenn").

David Benken, Julie Taymor's technical director, spoke with *The Washington Post* and neatly summarized why Disney's *The Lion King* ... "really opened up a lot of people's eyes as a different way to treat material" (Pressley). Case in point: while neither *Mary Poppins*, *Tarzan*, or *The Little Mermaid* became a Broadway icon in the way *The Lion King* has, the general success of each with mainstream audiences has brought to light the reality that "Animated-movie hits for kids could be made into surprisingly sophisticated theatrical fare for everyone, if a visionary such as Taymor took the reins" (Pressley). As Disney took risks, experimented, innovated, and set new expectations, other corporations were quietly watching in the background. Ultimately, this has led to other major players coming to take their chances on Broadway, such as DreamWorks Theatricals with *Shrek: The Musical*, Marvel Comics with *Spiderman: Turn Off the Dark*, and, most recently, Warner Bros Theater Ventures with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Broadway is now a place to find both brand new story adventures as well as familiar ones experienced in an entirely new way.

CHAPTER IV

PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

While many of Disney's Broadway shows have been successful, there have also been a fair share of flops and harsh criticisms regarding the company's place on Broadway. This chapter will cover a few of those flops as well as researched reviews and critiques concerning why the organization is viewed as a step backward for legitimate theatre.

The First Flop

After the stunning success of *The Lion King*, Thomas Schumacher was ready to continue the winning streak. The next endeavor was a musical called *Aida*, and would be Disney's first attempt at a show which did not originate as a hit animated movie. It was somewhat successful, receiving four Tony Awards, a Grammy, and a four and a half year run. It was the production after *Aida*, however, that proved to be the company's first big bust.

A decision was made to have Bob Crowley, scenic designer for *Mary Poppins* and *Aida*, make his directorial debut with *Tarzan*, the live-action staging of Disney's 1999 film adaptation of Edgar Rice Burroughs' novel. The story centers around a young orphaned boy stranded on the coast of West Africa. Raised by apes and increasingly confused by his uniqueness, his life is

transformed when a beautiful British botanist and her father suddenly appear in the jungle. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the first few moments of Crowley's production are breathtaking. Many critics considered Crowley's appointment as director to be another Taymor-esque risk by Disney and were inclined to compare the two. While the brilliant opening was praised as proving equal to the stunning first scene of *The Lion King*, the moment the shipwrecked family enters the jungle (the backdrop for the majority of the show), the magic suffocates between layers upon layers of swinging green vines.

Critics seemed to agree on a variety of reasons as to why the show might not play the Richard Rodgers Theatre for very long. Many commented on Phil Collins' score, which was expanded from the original five songs in the animated movie. His "workmanlike pop-rock score, heavy on percussion and synthesizers, is light on melodic and lyrical inspiration, not to mention dramatic functionality," wrote the editors of *Time Out New York*. David Rooney, of *Variety* wrote that the new numbers "rarely develop or build the way good musical theater songs should, and there's no punchy act-one closer or stirring final anthem ("Did Tarzan"). Others claimed that the production was void of depth or standout moments. A writer for *The Associated Press* called the show "emotionally and musically lightweight -- almost as skimpy as Tarzan's leather loincloth" ("Did Tarzan"). Ben Brantley wrote:

No moment seems to carry more dramatic weight than any other. All instances of swinging (and they are countless) have been created equal...The whole experience starts to feel like a super-deluxe day care center, equipped with lots of bungee cords and karaoke synthesizers, where kids can swing when they get tired of singing and vice versa. ("Broadway and Vine")

These reviewers held nothing back in their critiques, describing the show as “two yawn-inducing hours” (McCarter, “Phil Collins”), a “giant, writhing green blob” (Brantley, “Broadway and Vine”), and “something to sneeze at” (“Did Tarzan”).

Tarzan ranks as the seventh most expensive show ever produced on Broadway, costing Disney between \$12-16 million (Healy, “Flops”). Despite the substantial investment, theatergoers were not impressed, and most performances took place in front of a house only 70% full. The production closed after 14 months, including previews.

More Questionable Decisions

Two years prior to *Tarzan*’s shaky start, *Mary Poppins* premiered on the West End and was subsequently tweaked for Broadway. Opening at the New Amsterdam Theatre and running for 2,619 performances, it became the 30th longest running Broadway show to date. Midway through *Poppins*’ run, *The Little Mermaid* began previews at the nearby Lunt-Fontanne Theatre. The animated movie had been wildly successful during its 1989 release, grossing around \$84 million and another \$27 million during its 1997 re-release (boxofficemojo.com). In an interview with Campbell Robertson of *The New York Times*, Schumacher claimed that one of the reasons for *Tarzan*’s early closing was because “the affection for *Tarzan* the Disney movie did not run nearly as deep as the affection for *The Little Mermaid* does,” and that Disney now had “the right project” with *Mermaid*. Robertson went on to call this latest production one of the “biggest high-stakes gambles of the fall season” (“Monster”).

David Rooney attended one of *The Little Mermaid's* out of town tryouts at Denver Center for the Performing Arts. Even though the production was four months away from its Broadway premiere with plenty of time for changes, Rooney's review was particularly scathing. Summarizing the show as a "waterlogged misstep," he was quick to point out that which most other critics later agreed on: Disney had made yet another fatal mistake in its hiring choices (*"The Little Mermaid"*).

Hiring Julie Taymor to direct *The Lion King* had been risky, but her skills and expertise ended up being exactly what the production needed. Hiring Bob Crowley, a visual designer, to direct *Tarzan* was even riskier and definitely didn't pay off. Next came Francesca Zambello, an opera director, who was brought on to direct *Mermaid* along with George Tsypin (set designer) and Tatiana Noginova (costumes). Together they created a spectacle that "allowed emotion, charm and enchantment to be drowned in a sea of bewilderingly over-stylized designs" (Rooney, *"The Little Mermaid"*).

Zambello's creativity centered around her mantra: "no water, no wires." This firm stance required Tsypin to create an entire underwater world without using a single drop of H₂O. He designed elaborate set pieces using large amounts of plastic. "It was plastic, plastic everywhere, enough to lead you to drink," said Clive Barnes of *The New York Post*. These plastic pieces floated in and out of scenes and were mostly unidentifiable. Brantley called it "get-out-of-my-way water," pointing out that many of the actors seemed distracted as they

tried to avoid being overtaken by the plastic contraptions -- as well as their own costumes ("Fish Out").

Without wires, and with a major portion of the action taking place deep in the ocean, actors were costumed with Heelys, a kind of shoe with built-in skates for gliding on cue. The rest of Noginova's costumes were elaborate, colorful, and largely indistinguishable. Rooney called them "nuttily extravagant" ("The Little Mermaid") Brantley pointed out that these "guess-what-I-am costumes" don't properly identify many of the characters, which leaves the audience wondering "who is who and what they're supposed to be" ("Fish Out").

Both Brantley and Rooney agreed that a majority of the production was an "unfocused" spectacle, and much would have improved if the stage had been stripped of these distractions. Other critics were unanimous concerning the idea that *The Little Mermaid* was suffocated by the designer's visual concepts. Zambello had brought together an elaborate production, but "underneath all this baroque ornamentation was a tiny, tiny little musical struggling for its life" (Barnes). She lost sight of the story, the charm, and the characters, and the entire production suffered as a result.

Since these two flops, Disney has produced numerous live-action shows based on their hit films including *High School Musical*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Freaky Friday*, and *Newsies*. All have achieved varying levels of success, and families visiting Broadway are thrilled to have entertainment options filled with good values and role-model characters. As illustrated in the preceding chapters, Disney has proven they have much to offer the theatrical community.

Yet there are many cynics who hold firm to the idea that Mickey Mouse has no business on Broadway. But, why?

Critical Reactions

New Yorkers interested in preserving as much of the city as possible tend to believe Disney's move to Times Square "led to rampant over-commercialization" (Rosenberg and Pereira). Many loyal theatre patrons perceived the venture as nothing more than another ploy to bring in even greater revenue. In his *Telegraph* article entitled "Beast That Ate Broadway", Mark Steyn wrote:

Head a few blocks south to 42nd Street: where once a chap could stroll unmolested by the pressures of tawdry consumerism, save for the occasional two-for-the-price-of-one special offer from pre-op transsexual hookers, you're now assailed by Disney from every marquee...What's left of Broadway's theatre community despises it as a mere merchandising spin-off and resents the way the show can afford TV advertising beyond their wildest dreams, thanks to promotions on the Disney channel, the Disney-owned ABC network, their 10 TV stations, 21 radio stations and dozens of affiliates.

Neighboring theatre owners Shubert, Nederlander, and Jujamcyn, were appalled at the amazing deal Disney was handed along with the keys to The New Amsterdam theatre. The three banded together and urged theatrical unions to join them. Journalist Alex Witchel's article, "Is Disney the Newest Broadway Baby," noted the conflict:

The rivalry is intensified because this time, real estate is involved, not to mention government subsidy in the form of a \$21 million low-interest loan to help Disney renovate the 91-year-old New Amsterdam, a perk that other Broadway theater owners have historically been denied. One of them calls the Disney situation similar to Wal-Mart opening in a small town, sending the local merchants into an escalating panic.

However, realizing the prospect of increased employment for union members, the president of Actors' Equity, Ron Silver, said that he was "thrilled" about Disney's move, thereby putting an end to any potential uprising.

Theatre critics have also been grieving over a newly commercialized and unoriginal Broadway ever since Disney arrived. The *Hollywood Reporter's* Scott Feinberg summarized this feeling:

Right from the get-go, the theater community, which can barely agree on the day of the week, seemed to agree on one thing: however entertaining the Mouse House's stage ventures might be, they represented a dark turn for the Great White Way, towards corporatization and away from originality...many critics' and pundits' attitudes toward Disney Theatrical productions have remained largely the same: pining for days of yore (that never really existed) in which every show on Broadway was entirely original (meaning not drawn from an existing book, play, film or theme park attraction), the musical-theater gatekeepers have greeted each new show with chirps from the sidelines that they represent another nail in the coffin of what Broadway once was and is *supposed* to be.

Richard Zoglin of *Time Magazine* claimed that he generally likes Disney shows, but most critics are uncompromising in their opinions that "Disney shows are too big, too commercial, too over-marketed — not real theater so much as bloated "theme park" extravaganzas that only children and indiscriminating tourists could love."

Regardless of these cynics, a couple of disappointing flops, and a local sector who would prefer they had never stepped foot in Times Square, Disney has continued to press forward. Producing a Broadway hit is remarkably difficult, even for an established creative company with a lot of money to throw around. It requires the right story, the right risks, a unique team of visionaries, a stellar cast, and a myriad of other facets blending together in perfect harmony.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUDING NOTES

Limitations of the Study

While researching this topic, there were a few areas which proved difficult to assess or explore. These included particular Broadway theatre-goer demographics as well as any in-depth analysis of scenic or artistic design choices for each show. In addition, a few topics arose which might be worth exploring by future graduate students. This chapter will reveal those obstacles to the writing as well as some additional areas for research.

It's clear from the information presented in the previous chapters that Disney was a major player in the cleanup and redevelopment of Times Square and has made significant artistic contributions to the theatrical community. But when researching Broadway demographics, it was difficult to determine just how much of a role the Disney Theatrical Group played in increasing the number of young people attending theatre productions in New York City. Unfortunately, The League of American Theaters and Producers only began studying these numbers in 1996 -- two years after *Beauty and the Beast* premiered at The Palace Theatre. Previously, The League had conducted a one-time survey during the 1990-91 season, so the 1996-97 season was compared with those results.

The League was able to confirm that the number of ticket holders under the age of 18 doubled between 1991 and 1997 (Lyman). Even so, five years of important data is missing including any detailed analysis of the time periods just prior to and directly after Disney's first year on Broadway. Was that number steady up until 1994? Was there a sharp spike after *Beauty's* premiere, or did the rapid upturn have more to do with the changing atmosphere of Times Square in general?

Additionally, there is little public information to be found concerning the design process for each Disney production, particularly regarding each creative teams' decisions. For instance, why was Francesca Zambello so adamant against using water for *The Little Mermaid*? Why did Disney decide to hire an opera director in the first place? Various attempts to find documented interviews with these designers revealed only a few quotes and vague references. The majority of the available material surrounds Julie Taymor and her brilliant success with *The Lion King*. This discovery may not be surprising as it would be fairly nonsensical to conduct an interview with a failed creative. However, when the evidence (and reviews) suggest that a designer stunted a show, it might prove interesting to know what they were thinking and why they believed it would work, even if only for educational purposes.

Another hazy area revolved around the idea that many theatre patrons tend to scoff at Disney's presence on Broadway. In legitimate theatre circles, there seems to be a turning up of noses at the idea of a large corporation having anything of value to contribute to the art form and that, perhaps, Mickey Mouse

has only cheapened theatre, throwing craft aside for sheer merchandising and profitability. However, outside of scathing production critiques and a few forewarnings before *Beauty's* arrival, there is very little factual evidence to support these claims. Mark Steyn, quoted in the previous chapter, edged closest to this debate when he wrote about Broadway being turned into a "merchandising spin-off." He went on to add that Broadway is now "the only billion-dollar industry that can't be bothered developing new products. Today, a "new" Broadway musical is one with old songs, old dances, old orchestrations, old attitudes, and starring someone who made movies in the Fifties or had a sitcom in the Sixties or got to Number 84 in the Hit Parade in 1973" ("Beast"). Otherwise, and besides being the large entertainment corporation that it is, it is difficult to cite exactly *why* certain theater-goers often look upon Disney with such disdain.

In his previously quoted article, Alex Witchel explained how the three Broadway theatre owners had urged the unions to boycott Disney's move to Broadway. In that article, Ron Silver (president of Actors' Equity) said that he was "thrilled" about the news, claiming, "We have very few opportunities to increase employment for our membership." This is another area worthy of further exploration. What did employment statistics look like before Disney's productions? How many qualified theatre professionals were out of work at the time? How did these numbers change post-*Beauty*? Also, who currently employs the majority of working theatre artists? These questions could be an important piece of a larger body of research to be conducted in the future.

Lastly, it might prove interesting to develop a thesis around the themes and values which are central to Disney musicals. There appears to be an ongoing debate, particularly amongst parents who are looking for quality entertainment for their children. One side deems Disney as a safe choice, with role model characters and character-building life lessons. Another side seems to interpret Disney's values as antiquated, old fashioned, and in need of an update in our ever-evolving culture. Still another side is protecting their children from the fantastic and unrealistic ideas often presented by the typical fairytale structure. An in-depth analysis of all sides could be very intriguing.

Summary of Findings

In the 1920s, Times Square had been filled with theatrical productions. With an immense public transport system and new-found electricity, the city was destined to be an entertainment hub. But a series of events left these theatres with boarded-up doors and rotting interiors. Crime rates soared and the city's streets became unsafe. Multiple plans were presented as a means to turn the city around. Every one of these plans eventually toppled save for one. It was Rebecca Robertson's plan to bring back the "razzmatazz" of Times Square's past which ultimately paved the way for the city's success. Robertson needed a big player to encourage other corporations to invest in the neighborhood, and Disney played the part beautifully.

Once Disney agreed to join the block, others followed suit: AMC Theaters, Madame Tussauds Wax Museum, and many more. Mayor Giuliani promised Michael Eisner that all sex shops would be shut down, and he came through on

his commitment. The shops were closed, crime rates fell, and Times Square became a family-friendly destination. In his article entitled *Times Regained*, Adam Gopnik summarized this amazing transformation:

No other part of New York has had such a melodramatic, mood-ring sensitivity to the changes in the city's history, with an image for every decade. There was the turn-of-the-century Times Square, with its roof gardens and showgirls; the raffish twenties Times Square of Ziegfeld and Youmans tunes; the thirties Times Square of "42nd Street," all chorus lines and moxie; the forties, V-J "On the Town" Times Square, full of sailors kissing girls; the wizened black-and-white fifties Times Square of "Sweet Smell of Success," steaming hot dogs, and grungy beats; and then the sixties and the seventies Times Square of "Midnight Cowboy" and "Taxi Driver," where everything fell apart and Hell wafted up through the manhole covers. No other place in town has been quite so high and quite so low. Within a single half decade, it had Harpo Marx in the Marx Brothers' valedictory movie, "Love Happy," leaping ecstatically from sign to sign and riding away on the flying Mobilgas Pegasus, and, down below, the unforgettable image of James Dean, hunched in his black overcoat, bearing the weight of a generation on his shoulders.

Now, of course, we have the new Times Square, as fresh as a neon daisy, with a giant Gap and a Niketown and an Applebee's and an ESPN Zone and television announcers visible through tinted windows, all family retailing and national brands. In some ways, the Square has never looked better, with the diagonal sloping lines of the Reuters Building, the curving Deco zipper, even the giant mock dinosaur in the Toys R Us.

The Disney Theatrical Group has achieved consistent ticket sales using their unique algorithm for dynamic pricing, consistently landing the highest grosses on Broadway despite nearby shows charging two to three times as much for the best seats. This system has given their productions more long-term staying power, and has allowed them to maintain an attractive level of accessibility, particularly for families paying full price for multiple children. Critics may not always be thrilled, but ticket sales confirm audience enjoyment and demand.

Final Thoughts

As I've been concluding this thesis, and having read so much about *The Lion King's* critical acclaim, I decided I needed to experience the show for myself. I paid \$70 for a fantastic seat at the West End production a few weeks ago, and was thrilled by the creativity and brilliant design. My awe was inspired far more by the artistic decisions than the book itself. In fact, much of the dialogue is tired and campy. The original songs from the film hold up on stage, but the additions are superfluous. The choices made by Julie Taymor and her team (choices which were initially incredibly risky for both her and Disney) prove that even though the corporation may be bringing old material to the stage, their creativity, production values, and willingness to take chances are making positive contributions to the larger theatre community and art form.

This is a topic which will undoubtedly continue to be debated for a long time. The debate can be beneficial if we are willing to listen to each side. At face value, it is easy to only see sheer profit and gimmick. But anyone who takes the time to dive into the history, facts, trends, and reviews will come face to face with the remarkable role Disney played in reviving Times Square as a thriving entertainment haven and the many important creative contributions to the performing arts. May those of us in the theatre community continue asking questions surrounding the value, purpose, and quality of what we see, and may we strive to grow and learn from each other, together.

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