

Article

How to Dismantle a [Theatric] Bomb: Broadway Flops, Broadway Money, and Musical Theater Historiography

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Abstract: The Broadway musical, balancing as it does artistic expression and commerce, is regularly said to reflect its sociocultural surroundings. Its historiography, however, tends for the most part to emphasize art over commerce, and exceptional productions over all else. Broadway histories tend to prioritize the most artistically valued musicals; occasional lip service, too, is paid to extraordinary commercial successes on the one hand, and lesser productions by creators who are collectively deemed great artists on the other. However, such a historiography provides less a reflection of reality than an idealized and thus somewhat warped portrait of the ways the commercial theater, its gatekeepers, and its chroniclers prioritize certain works and artists over others. Using as examples *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* (1971), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Carrie* (1988), and *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* (2011), I will suggest that a money-minded approach to the study of musicals may help paint a clearer picture of what kinds of shows have been collectively deemed successful enough to remember, and what gets dismissed as worthy of forgetting.

Keywords: Broadway musicals; Broadway flops; commercial theater industry; *Carrie*; *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*; *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*; *Merrily We Roll Along*; theater economics

1. Introduction

The Broadway musical, balancing as it does artistic expression and commerce, is regularly said to reflect its sociocultural surroundings. Its historiography, however, tends for the most part to emphasize art over commerce, and exceptional productions over everything else. Broadway histories tend to prioritize the most artistically valued musicals, although occasional lip service is paid to extraordinary commercial successes on the one hand, and lesser productions by creators who are collectively deemed great artists on the other. However, such a historiography provides less a reflection of reality than an idealized and thus warped portrait of the ways the commercial theater, its gatekeepers, and its chroniclers prioritize certain works and artists over others.

This historiographic lopsidedness has been noted by a growing number of scholars. In “Average Broadway,” Derek Miller points out that most theater histories proceed “by example and from the exemplary—that is, from the most successful and formally definitive works of any given era” to the next, in an ever-lengthening span of productions deemed archetypal. Such an approach necessarily deemphasizes or elides productions and people deemed “not outstanding either in their glory or their failure” (Miller 2016, p. 529), resulting in a historiography built of “prodigious exceptions” (ibid., p. 546). In her introduction to *Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture and Identity*—an essay collection dedicated entirely to disrupting the musical’s extant historiography—Sarah Whitfield argues that overwhelming focus on Broadway and the West End results in a hierarchization that privileges “some people, places and events” as “more important, more worth remembering and paying attention to than

others” (Whitfield 2019, p. xii). Other scholars have begun to consider the role stage musicals play in different places and through different lenses, which will surely help address historiographic lacunae going forward.¹

Yet in working toward a scholarly approach to Broadway’s musical flops—one that considers ways in which commercial disappointments jibe with cultural and industrial shifts—I find that scholars and historians tend to approach flops in much the same way they do hits: flops that make it into musical theater histories are somehow superlative, and thus deemed worthy of a mention in the first place. Failed productions that warrant mention typically belong in one of two categories, which occasionally overlap. Noble flops—Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Allegro* (1947); Bernstein’s *Candide* (1956); numerous critically lauded, commercially disappointing Sondheim musicals—earn mention by dint of the *artistes* who created them. Especially notorious flops—*Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1966); *Dude and Via Galactica* (1972); *Dance of the Vampires* (2002)—get enshrined in dishy books like Ken Mandelbaum’s *Not Since Carrie: Forty Years of Musical Flops*, less as worthy of assessment than as cautionary tales about naiveté, arrogance, waste, and ineptitude. The quietest, least schadenfreude-producing of flops—what Miller might call “average” ones—are overwhelmingly dismissed as not important enough to remember.

While statistics vary, it is widely understood that most Broadway shows fail to recoup their investments, and that a slim percentage of hit productions—typically lower than 10% of the total—earn a vast majority of Broadway’s collective take over a season (Donahue and Patterson 2010, pp. 30–31). By ignoring commercial failures as subjects for scholarly analysis, musical theater historians only continue to privilege superlative productions. A more holistic approach to the stage musical—one that takes into consideration the commerce side of the equation alongside the artistic one—might result in a more honest, equitable reflection of Broadway and its output.

In the following pages, I will suggest a brief typology of Broadway musical flops as they apply to four case-studies: the notorious flops *Carrie* (1988) and *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* (2011), the noble flop *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), and the vanity project *Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death* (1971). Using evidence from primary and secondary sources, and drawing from recorded conversations with critics, theater artists, and members of the U.S. commercial theater industry, I will suggest that a money-minded approach to the study of musicals may help illuminate the kinds of Broadway productions that are, on the one hand, collectively deemed successful enough to remember and, on the other hand, collectively dismissed as worthy of forgetting.²

Of course, typologies are never hermetic or wholly discrete, perhaps especially when they are applied to the arts. While I cannot claim that these case studies are exemplary or air-tight, the four productions I discuss all shared especially turbulent production and reception histories, while their legacies and historiographic treatments differ markedly. I hope their stories will together help highlight contemporary business practices in the commercial theater industry, widespread and influential assumptions among Broadway’s gatekeepers, and ways money can exert emphasis on musical theater historiography—even while it is studiously ignored by critics, historians and scholars.

2. Broadway’s Money Hangups

The historiographic distance to the commercial side of the art-commerce equation stems in part from the fact that the American commercial theater industry itself tends to seriously downplay its

¹ See for a very recent example (Wolf 2020).

² While no organized subdiscipline devoted entirely to failure studies seems yet to cohere, there has been interest enough in the topic in recent years to have yielded numerous scholarly works devoted to theories and concepts of failure as they apply to the arts. There are too many to list in entirety here, but the reader interested in learning further about failure studies, such as they are, might begin with the Special Issue of *Velvet Light Trap* titled “Failures, Flops and False Starts” (volume 64, Fall 2009) (Halberstam 2011; Bailes 2011), the Special Issue of *Performance Research* titled “On Failure” (17: 1, 2012), and (Fisher and Katsouraki 2018).

own commercial trappings.³ Producers and theater owners, especially the Disney Theatrical Group and the Shubert Organization, can be highly evasive about how money works behind the scenes.⁴ Accessibility to the financial workings of the industry thus proves exceedingly challenging.

The tendency of such organizations to keep mum about money is hardly new. In the introduction to his 1932 study *The Business of the Theatre: An Economic History of the American Theatre, 1750–1932*, Alfred Bernheim acknowledges that despite the vast literature published about theatrical entertainment in America by that point, his was the first to consider its money. Yet this proclamation is followed by an apology: researching and writing the book, Bernheim confesses, was very difficult due to “a strange mixture of reticence and outspokenness in the discourse of those I interviewed—reticence about their own affairs; outspokenness about everyone else’s . . . That certain records were not open to me was an obstacle which could not be entirely overcome” (Bernheim 1932, p. 2). A related barrier was the widespread tendency among informants to glorify the past as more artistically sound, while lamenting the comparatively mercenary and artless present. “It is generally held,” Bernheim mused, “that the theater has become commercial only during the past fifty years [...] The change is accounted for by the fact that commercially-minded men have wrested control from the artistically-minded. A belief of this sort prejudices anyone who accepts it against the present order of the theatre and militates against an impartial examination of its merits and defects” (ibid., p. 3).

Thomas Gale Moore argued in his 1968 *The Economics of the American Theater* that the theater industry’s aversion to prioritizing its own commercialism results from its collective devotion to the arts: “Since the financial rewards from presenting shows are, on the average, modest, producers would work elsewhere if they did not love the stage” (Moore 1968, p. 23). Whatever the reason, the tradition continues to run deep: nearly a century after Bernheim’s study, the authors of the 2010 book *Stage Money: The Business of the Professional Theatre* explain that the oligopoly running Broadway remains so secretive about its money that most of the research conducted for their book was by necessity based on public sources (Donahue and Patterson 2010, pp. xii–xiii).

The distance to money these authors describe jibes with the way many contemporary producers discuss their role in the industry. The celebrated producer Daryl Roth, for example, takes pains to emphasize the fact that she always prioritizes art over money: “Commercial value is not at the top of my list. I mean, the things that I’ve done, some have been very successful financially, some have not.” Her mission as a producer, she argues, is to produce “the kind of work that has meaning [...] There are [...] producers [who] just look for projects they feel will have [...] broad appeal. That there’d be no reason why anyone couldn’t buy a ticket for this show. I applaud that. It’s just not where my philosophy is.”⁵

A tendency to downplay the very commercial trappings the industry relies on to survive has surely been carefully cultivated over the years: after all, no one thinks of the shows they nurture, whether artistically or financially, as the marketplace equivalents of porkbelly futures or barrels of light, sweet crude. Creators and consumers of musicals fall in love with a show’s characters, songs, dance sequences, and plots—less with its operating budget, contract riders, or weekly take. It is in any entertainment industry’s best interests to downplay those aspects of beloved entertainments that threaten to drag audiences away from the chance at transcendence. But in so obscuring the way Broadway actually works, the industry—and, then, its gatekeepers, historians, and scholars—cloud the fact that the failure or success of a show can have less to do with art than with money, institutional support, and who is or is not granted access to those things.

³ It stems as well from longstanding and deeply rooted assumptions in the academy about what should count as “art” and what should be dismissed as mere commercial “entertainment,” but such academic hierarchies and hangups are well beyond the scope of this article.

⁴ See (Donahue and Patterson 2010) for more information on both organizations.

⁵ Personal communication, 30 May 2019.

3. Flop Terminology

The word “flop” carries a host of negative connotations, but at least as it was initially applied to Broadway, it had a purely economic designation. In the once-hugely influential showbusiness weekly *Variety*, a flop was any production that failed to “recoup its initial investment during its Broadway run, even if only shy by five or ten percent of the capitalization” (Sherman 2012, n.p.). General manager Peter Boggy explains that along purely financial lines, shows almost always flop in exactly the same way: “Shows fail because not enough people want to see them. The show can’t figure out how to sell enough tickets to cover expenses, they’re losing money, and eventually their reserve gets eaten up. If there’s no indication that sales trends are improving [...] if the show doesn’t close, the producer [...] will be personally liable. So, ultimately, all shows close because they’re [...] not selling.”⁶

Lore has it that especially powerful theater critics can make or break a show with a single review, but evidence relating to shows’ finances indicates the contrary. Decades before redevelopment, Disneyfication, and technology contributed to a perceived decline in the power of critics, Moore’s analysis of their impact yielded “unimpressive” results. “Reviewers,” Moore concluded, “can hardly be said to have a major effect on profits; it does not even appear that they are a very accurate reflection of public preferences” (Moore 1968, p. 13). Reviews can certainly help steer a show toward hit or flop status, but so long as there is money in a production’s reserve fund—its war-chest of emergency cash that producers can dip into while attempting to reach audiences—what critics say does not necessarily matter.

A chief reason that even the most poorly reviewed Broadway productions nevertheless tend to stay open longer than they once did again has largely to do with money. Production models have not changed drastically since the industry was established, but redevelopment and Disneyfication have resulted in the significant growth of deep-pocketed investors. Boggy explains that most contemporary players who sport the title of “producer” in Broadway programs technically are not:

as things get more expensive, it takes more and more people to produce a show. When I was growing up [...] it was still ‘David Merrick Presents,’ or ‘Alexander Cohen Presents.’ Now you see all these names [...] but most of them are not really producers. They’re investors who have earned the title of producer by coming up with a big chunk of change. They don’t have significant say in the day-to-day running [...] and the artistic decisions. Those are [...] the lead producers, and there are usually between one and three. Rarely more than three because it’s not possible to function with too many people who have to agree on key decisions.⁷

Daryl Roth, too, acknowledges the fact that experienced contemporary producers now know to bulk up their shows’ reserves well before the preview period begins.⁸ More investors means more moneyed productions with bigger reserves, which in turn can help shows survive increasingly long stretches of poor ticket sales. Poorly reviewed productions that fail to find audiences may still flop, but the bigger a reserve, the longer a struggling production can work toward earning its primary investment back.

Just as a hit Broadway musical is not necessarily an artistically excellent one, a flop is not automatically aesthetically poor. This is why most people do not conceive of hits and flops on purely financial terms, the way *Variety* did: doing so creates dry binaries that suck the heart and soul out of Broadway entertainments. Industry members, gatekeepers, chroniclers, and fans alike tend instead to infuse Broadway productions with emotion—rejoicing collectively, for example, over a monster hit or indulging together in *schadenfreude* when something perceived as excessive or inane flops especially dramatically. Then again, just as financial data cannot create a complete picture of Broadway hits and flops, nor can the subjective measurements of success and failure so regularly committed

⁶ Personal communication, 29 April 2019.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Personal communication, 30 May 2019.

to—and then repeatedly recycled from—critics’ reviews, opinionated histories, and generations of extant scholarship.

4. Notorious Flops: *Carrie* and *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*

Broadway’s biggest hits—like *Oklahoma!*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Hamilton*—are almost always canonized for their artistry, stylistic innovations, and resonance with their respective cultural moments. Their lasting power—a quaint means of acknowledging the loads of money they make in achieving artistic greatness—certainly come into play as well. Assessments are, for the most part, flipped when it comes to Broadway’s most notorious flops; these are inevitably reviled in the press and, later, in historical treatments, for being laughably inept, lacking in artistry, and offensively wasteful with money. Filthy lucre rarely gets mentioned in the press or in Broadway histories quite as often as it does when a very big, very expensive show flops very hard.

The loss of enormous amounts of money is, in fact, central to what makes a notorious flop notorious in the first place. The reception of notorious flops such as the megamusical *Carrie* and the mega-megamusical *Spider-Man*, for example, overwhelmingly emphasized their unsatisfactory aesthetics—thus, what looked and sounded bad from the stage—but also their distastefully swollen budgets.

Attacks on notorious flops likely stem in part from longstanding anxieties among industry members, gatekeepers, and fans about the potential for mercenary outsiders to contribute to a decline in artistry on Broadway. A good decade before Disney’s arrival on Broadway prompted myriad declarations of the certain death of the American stage musical—and of the inevitable theme-parkification of Times Square—in the late 1990s, the musical adaptation of Stephen King’s horror novella *Carrie* (music by Michael Gore, book by Lawrence D. Cohen, lyrics by Dean Pitchford) was greeted with concern in the American press and outright condemnation among British critics well before it arrived on Broadway in 1988. The fact that the musical was so large, expensive, and highly anticipated—and that its production team was built almost entirely of outsiders unfamiliar with the workings of Broadway—only drew more anxious attention as it “churned” toward the U.S. like so much foul, threatening weather.⁹

The first production to feature a company equally cast with American and British actors under a new agreement between U.S. and British Equity (Hummeler 1988, p. 136), *Carrie* was initially to be produced by veteran Broadway producers Fran and Barry Weissler in partnership with the Royal Shakespeare Company; when the Weisslers dropped out, a German producer, Friedrich Kurz, stepped in despite no experience outside Germany. Encouraged by the international success of predecessor Trevor Nunn’s production of *Les Misérables*, RSC director Terry Hands signed on to direct, despite never having directed an American musical.¹⁰ *Carrie* was initially set to premiere at the RSC, move to the West End, and then transfer to Broadway; the RSC would earn 10% of all profits wherever the musical ran.

Hands was quick to justify the “eccentric marriage” of Shakespeare and Stephen King to a doubtful press: at the time, the Thatcher government was admonishing “Britain’s subsidized arts organizations to become more enterprising and self-reliant,” and the RSC was anxious about covering its operating costs (Trucco 1988, p. 20). Nevertheless, there was plenty of pushback. Many British theater critics accused the RSC of “prostituting its good name” for money (ibid.), while members of the American theater industry and theater press corps decried the glut of megamusicals filling Broadway houses, griped about skyrocketing costs, and theorized that the popularity of European imports had

⁹ <https://search-proquest-com.remote.baruch.cuny.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/110566290/74CBD56DBD024930PQ/1?accountid=8500> (accessed on 4 April 2020).

¹⁰ For discussion of the pushback Nunn himself generated as a director with a foot each in “legitimate” and “commercial” ventures, see the chapter on *Les Mis* in (Sternfeld 2006, especially pp. 179–81).

resulted in an “addiction to spectacle” among Broadway audiences, presumably at the expense of art (Rothstein 1989, p. 10).

At Stratford, *Carrie* played to sold-out crowds of atypically young spectators, but was panned by critics whom, a *Variety* reporter noted, showed no shortage of “resentment over what might be termed the RSC’s blatant commercialism” (*Variety* 1988, p. 515). As it made its way to Broadway, ultimately skipping the West End for lack of time and money, *Carrie* experienced numerous setbacks related to the inexperience of its creative team and producer. Yet none of these were what finally did the production in; Dean Pitchford insists that for all *Carrie*’s woes, Kurz’s lack of expertise with money management was what led to its abrupt closure after only sixteen previews and five regular performances:

Kurz had no war chest [...] If you go back and look [...] there were some very bad reviews and there were some very good ones. Any good [...] producer would’ve been able to make hay with the good reviews. Instead [...] Kurz called the cast together and said, ‘we are going to run in spite of what the critics are saying [...] we had enough positive reviews and [...] I’m behind you 100%.’ There were hugs and [...] tears and [...] celebration, and [...] on his way to the airport, he called his business manager and closed all the bank accounts [...] Monday morning, everybody discovered that there was no more money [...] Rocco Landesman [...] was an investor by dint of the fact that we were in a Jujamcyn theater. Rocco scrambled [...] to raise some much-needed funds [...] but he’d been cut off at the knees.¹¹

Pitchford’s account was not an especially exciting aspect of the production—all shows, after all, fold when they run out of money, and *Carrie* was fraught in so many other more obvious, newsworthy ways. Nevertheless, his story jibes with an article that ran in *Time* after the show closed. Following Landesman’s own melodramatic proclamation that *Carrie* was “the biggest flop in the world history of the theater, going all the way back to Aristophanes”, Kurz, contacted in Hamburg, offered no explanation as to why he lied to the company, but did acknowledge that he had made the abrupt decision to cut his significant losses (Henry 1988, p. 65).

While nearly every article to run in the UK or US touched on *Carrie*’s financial wastefulness, it takes more digging for evidence of the fact that most large-scale musicals to run on Broadway at the time cost about as much as *Carrie* did. *Phantom*, for example, opened two years prior, also at a capitalization of USD 8 million; the homegrown *Jerome Robbins’ Broadway* cost USD 7 million to mount in 1989 (Rothstein 1989, p. 1). *Carrie* was not especially wasteful by contemporary standards; arguably, it was lambasted as a waste of money because its inexperienced producer failed to make any.

In contrast, the production snags, accidents, and unprecedented USD 75 million budget that plagued *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* were frequently blamed on director Julie Taymor, the sole member of the musical’s creative team to have Broadway experience.¹² During the production’s troubled, notoriously long preview period, Taymor became the easy target of *New York Post* gossip columnist Michael Riedel, who gleefully painted her as an arrogant, uncooperative, profligate diva—and the primary reason for the production’s myriad setbacks. The Broadway press reflected Riedel’s perspectives (Green 2010, n.p.), which were further solidified when *Spider-Man*’s producers fired Taymor, announced an overhaul of the production, and publicly scapegoated her for its many problems (Dorment 2011, pp. 180–81).

Much like *Carrie*, *Spider-Man* made for riveting press precisely because it was so atypical: it featured a high-profile but largely inexperienced creative team; an ever-revolving cast and production team; a great many accidents that occurred during its seemingly endless rehearsal and preview period; and a huge budget that only seemed to balloon by the week, and which was quickly deemed insultingly extravagant so soon after the Great Recession.¹³ The intensity of news coverage waned once the

¹¹ Personal communication, 31 May 2019.

¹² It is worth noting that Taymor was also the only woman on the creative team. See (Wollman and Sternfeld 2011).

¹³ For detailed histories of the production, see (Bernstein 2010), or (Berger 2013).

accidents and production delays slowed, and the retooled *Spider-Man* opened for what turned out to be a two-and-a-half-year run. Yet the production team's inexperience on Broadway resulted in its habit of throwing money at the show's problems. This—not Taymor's work habits, the bad publicity, or the aesthetic shortcomings of the production itself—is why *Spider-Man* closed at a USD 60 million loss. As Bogyo notes, "*Spider-Man* isn't the norm, it's the exception. That was bad producing [...] Why no one along the way said, 'Stop!' It's like there was no producer [...] who could control it."¹⁴ Notorious flops may be exciting to report on, gossip about, and chuckle over, but in the end, their demises are no more interesting than those of other kinds of flops. They do not close because they are bad. They close because they are broke.¹⁵

What stacked the deck against *Carrie* and *Spider-Man*, at least beyond their atypical production problems, was their size, expense, and the inexperience of their production teams. Critics and historians may actively eschew discussions about money, but Broadway's industry is driven by the bottom line. Many of its players thus tend to be more welcoming to established personnel, both on the creative and production sides, than they are to newcomers. "Broadway can be clubby, and the outsider is viewed with suspicion, but that has a rational, financial basis," Bogyo explains. "If you're a theater owner and a new producer comes in, how do you know that this person will be able to raise the millions of dollars needed? If they're a veteran producer with a long track record, you're not worried. You'll think: 'that producer has their stable of investors and three Tony awards.' But if someone doesn't have a track record, you're nervous. Certainly, some people who get into this for the first time are successful. But people are mistrustful, so it's not easy to break in."¹⁶

A mistrust of outsiders, however, has ramifications that can affect what gets championed on Broadway, both by its industry and gatekeepers. When asked about rules he sets for himself as a critic, for example, Peter Marks of *The Washington Post* confesses a sensitivity to the art-commerce balance in productions he assesses: "If I think something is just a mercenary ripoff [...], the kind of show where they're not attempting to be artful [...], it's almost like a scam to me. Those infuriate me, and I don't think there's any reason to hold back. [But] if it's Sondheim, or some wonderful—you know, Jeanine Tesori—I'm going to take into consideration what they've brought to the table before; there's a certain amount of respect."¹⁷ According to both Marks and Bogyo, then, some Broadway players are more worthy than others. These comments jibe with the historiographic tendency to treat flops by beloved *artistes* gently, while dismissing outsiders as untried hacks who reap what they sow.

5. Noble Flops: *Merrily We Roll Along*

Noble flops will be given the shortest treatment here because they are already so well-represented in the scholarly literature. There are oodles of noble flops to choose from, since scholars have written fairly extensively about shows by creative greats that did not become hits,¹⁸ but George Furth and Stephen Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along* seems a particularly fitting example since it has been so frequently reworked and restaged in a collective, international impulse to rescue it from "that limbo of beautiful, broken theater pieces" (Brantley 2013, p. 4), and to burnish it into the masterpiece it has long been deemed worthy of becoming (Teachout 2017, p. A13). *Merrily* was the final collaboration

¹⁴ Personal communication.

¹⁵ It is, of course, impossible to measure what is "good" and "bad" objectively; as noted earlier in this article, countless Broadway productions that are hailed for artistic brilliance nevertheless flop, just as countless productions attacked for comparative artlessness not only survive their hostile receptions, but run for years or even decades.

¹⁶ Personal communication.

¹⁷ Personal communication, 31 January 2019. My thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer who points out here that Sondheim is a central figure in musical theater's hagiography, and that associations of his output with artistic brilliance that is somehow magically divorced from commerce coalesced at the same time musical theater studies was cohering into an academic discipline in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

¹⁸ Most biographies of Broadway's most esteemed composers and lyricists feature lengthy discussion and analysis of their productions, including commercial disappointments, but for a broader discussion of flops by a number of Broadway greats, see chapter three of Mandelbaum's *Not Since Carrie*.

between Sondheim and Hal Prince—both of whom enjoyed reputations for artistic brilliance by the early '80s. The production was captured from its earliest stages by an ABC-TV crew for use in an unmade documentary about what, it was widely assumed, would be a critically-acclaimed hit (Holden 2016, p. C8). Yet when *Merrily* opened following a troubled preview period, critics cited the cynical book, reverse chronology, underdeveloped characters, young and unknown cast, and bulky costumes as chief among its many problems. While not everyone was immediately impressed with the show's score, Frank Rich of *The New York Times* found the songs to be "crushing and beautiful," even as the production was, he felt, otherwise "a shambles" (Rich 1989, p. C9). *Merrily* closed after exhausting its reserve following 16 regular performances.

Despite its exceedingly short run, a cast recording was made, due entirely to Sondheim's stature as a towering *artiste* and to the close relationship he had thus developed with producers at Masterworks Broadway.¹⁹ The beautifully packaged album, featuring on its cover a photograph of the master being serenaded adoringly by Al Hirschfeld's caricatures of the cast, reinforced Sondheim's genius and *Merrily*'s legacy as a noble flop. So too did countless college productions and a major overhaul of the musical for a 1985 La Jolla revival. More revisions and regional productions followed through the decades; the "brutal shock" of the Broadway production's demise was examined in original cast-member Lonny Price's 2016 documentary *Best Worst Thing That Ever Could Have Happened* which, *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden wrote, "movingly chronicles the buildup to the opening of a musical that everyone expected would be a hit" (Holden 2016, p. C8). The hagiography surrounding *Merrily*—and any number of similarly ennobled flops—speaks volumes about what shows get a second, fifteenth, or fiftieth chance at greatness, and what gets relegated to the dustiest corners of the archives—if it is preserved at all.

6. Vanity Productions: *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*

The term "vanity production" has long been used disparagingly on Broadway to refer to a show mounted by a dilettante with a dream and a great deal of money. As the critic Jesse Green points out, the term unfairly implies that the show being described will not be very good. "Damning a musical as a vanity production is like damning a car as a metal production," he writes. "What the term really seems to suggest is not self-centeredness but overreaching" (Green 2005, section 1, p. 2). Should a vanity production succeed, Green concludes, it would no longer be considered a vanity production; rather, "we'd be crediting their masterminds with daring instead of egotism" (ibid.). By dismissing something as a vanity production, the theater industry, critics, and scholars spin a self-fulfilling prophecy, thus looking past a considerable number of Broadway shows—including those that manage to challenge the status quo, both on stage and off.

For example, *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* (1971), with book, music, and lyrics by Melvin Van Peebles, was a highly innovative musical that used unorthodox production models and marketing strategies to attract thousands of spectators who were brand new to Broadway. Due to Van Peebles' status as a Broadway outsider—he remains most famous for his 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*—and to his musical's atypical structure and challenging subject matter, *Ain't Supposed to Die* divided critics, inspiring widely divergent and often bluntly racist coverage during its run. Drained of its reserves by the time it opened, the musical nevertheless ran 325 performances, largely without support from the white, upper-middle-class spectators Broadway continues to rely on.

Because less is written about this musical than the previous examples, some background is in order: Born in 1932 and educated at Ohio Wesleyan University, Van Peebles worked at various points as an Air Force pilot, cable car gripman, novelist, playwright, filmmaker, director, producer, composer, recording artist, and options trader. His first film, *La Permission (The Story of a Three-Day Pass)*, about an affair between a black American man and a white Frenchwoman, was an arthouse success in

¹⁹ Personal communication with producer Thomas Z. Shepard, 20 December 2019.

1967. It led to his breakthrough as the director and composer for the Columbia Pictures comedy *Watermelon Man* (1970), about a racist white man who wakes up one morning to find that he has become black (Surowiecki 1999, pp. 176–78). Despite Columbia's offer of a three-picture deal following the success of the film, Van Peebles turned his back on Hollywood in pursuit of total artistic freedom (Gates 2014, pp. 13–14). Using earnings from *Watermelon Man* and loans from well-off black friends, he produced, wrote, directed, starred in, edited, scored, and marketed *Sweetback*. That film, which cost USD 500,000 to make, grossed over USD 15 million at the box office, helped catalyze the independent film movement and the blaxploitation genre, and became required viewing for all members of the Black Panther Party (ibid., p. 9).

Concurrently, Van Peebles cut several albums of original songs composed in Sprechgesang style for A&M Records. His 1971 album *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* was introduced to Broadway producers Emanuel Azenberg, Eugene Wolsk, and Robert Malina by stage manager Charles Blackwell. Intrigued, the team traveled to Sacramento State College to see a student production inspired by the album. Van Peebles joined the team, which hired Gilbert Moses, a founder of the Free Southern Theater, to direct a Broadway version scheduled to open in fall 1971.²⁰

A collage of poetic soliloquies declaimed over a mix of funk, jazz, and R&B, *Ain't Supposed to Die* is set in an anonymous urban hellscape, which most of the city's critics assumed was Harlem. The musical explores the power structures borne of white supremacy, which simultaneously plague and become internalized by the poor, black underclass. Interconnected vignettes depict underpaid, overworked people whose menial jobs and perpetual disenfranchisement thwart any chance at upward mobility. Hustlers work the streets, sex workers are brutalized by pimps, and weary residents await buses and emergency vehicles that arrive late if they arrive at all. A young girl lured into prostitution is raped by corrupt cops; a teen boy is gunned down by a white police officer.

The musical ends when a bag lady who has wandered through the action for the duration of the show kneels over the slain teen. She then faces the audience and, as the cast stands behind her, performs "Put a Curse on You," a monologue accompanied by dissonant piano ostinatos and bleating brass, that condemns everyone "who sits by and watches the degradation extant in this country without becoming outraged and moved to action" (Riley 1971, p. 1):

May all your children end up junkies too/Yo mammy trick by the pound to buy that ounce/Yo
young daughters/Give rich old dudes head in limousines too/Put a curse on you
May the block/Gobble up your futures too/And them rats come slippin' out your trash/And
slidin' into your children's cribs too/Put my curse on you

Critics, many of whom felt personally attacked by the finale, were passionately divided on the production. Most critics who wrote for the city's black newspapers embraced the piece,²¹ and several white critics writing for the city's major news outlets were ecstatic about it. Martin Gottfried called it "magnificent" and "virtually flawless" in *Women's Wear Daily* (Gottfried 1971, p. 14). Jack Kroll described it as "one of the most brilliant, significant theatrical explosions Broadway has seen in years" in *Newsweek* (Kroll 1971, p. 85). Marilyn Stasio called it "electrifying", "extraordinary" and "shattering" in *Cue* (Stasio 1971, p. 7). Clive Barnes was more hesitant in *The New York Times*, but was also notably candid about his discomfort with and distance from the subject matter: "I suspect that this is a fair picture of a 1971 street scene—not, dear friend, where you live, but I suspect that people do, and rats and things like that," he scrambled, before assuming that Broadway's majority-white spectators could only view the piece as he did: "as a journey to a foreign country" (Barnes 1971, p. 55).

Barnes' review proved atypical in just how tentative it was; most critics who did not rave about *Ain't Supposed to Die* attacked it in livid, often brusquely racist terms. In *Newsday*, George Oppenheimer

²⁰ Personal communication with Emanuel Azenberg, 31 July 2019.

²¹ See for example Clayton Riley's (1971) rave for *The Amsterdam News*.

called it “a compendium of ugliness, violence, tastelessness, and fury” and wrote, “I do not recall who it was who said that black plays should be reviewed by black critics” but that he “shall be pleased to yield [his] place to a black or any other critic, should something even faintly like this occur again” (Oppenheimer 1971, n.p.). In the *Morning Telegraph*, Leo Mishkin complained that he could not understand the cast’s “idiomatic” speech, suggested that Van Peebles was motivated by “burning resentment against what is commonly known as the white power structure” and called the production “savage and bitter” (Mishkin 1971, p. 3). On WPIX’s evening news, Martin Bookspan called it “sickening”, accused it of “total and unadulterated hatred of white society,” and warned that it would incite black spectators to riot.²²

When the reviews came out, *Ain’t Supposed to Die* was already struggling with a drained reserve and a “laughable” advance, so the producers suggested posting closing notices. Van Peebles chose instead to pad the reserve with USD 75,000 of his own money while cultivating new marketing to keep the show afloat (Hummler 1972, p. LS1). “One of the dictums in the business is never use your own money,” he told the press, but “what fascinates me is how many people abdicate their artistic autonomy in lieu of doing it themselves” (Gussow 1972, p. SM14). He and Moses worked to galvanize the cast. “Predictably, many of the reviews show that not only are the critics patronizing and racist, but stupid”, Moses wrote in a memo to the company. “[We need] to build our own audience, set up our own systems, independent of the white society [...] The play has succeeded in the only way that needs to have meaning for us. We have created a work of art and black people dig it.”²³

Van Peebles devoted himself to courting black spectators, disabusing his producers that advance sales were necessary: “[Broadway] isn’t geared at all to black-audience ticket buying [...] Joan Baez will sell out three months in advance. James Brown will sell 40 per cent to 60 per cent of his tickets the night of the concert. But he will still sell out.” Indeed, once focus turned to cultivating black audiences, most tickets for the production sold the night of the show (Gussow 1972, n.p.).

Van Peebles moved into his producer’s offices, where he worked in marathon stretches between naps on an office couch. He commandeered the advertising and marketing campaigns, reviewing every advertisement and marketing blitz to appeal to black audiences. He and his producers waived their weekly fees. He contacted black churches, schools, civil rights organizations, social clubs, and fraternal orders within 200 miles of Manhattan, making tickets available on a sliding scale. He arranged for busloads of prisoners from Rikers Island to see the production (Gussow 1972, p. SM14), and visited majority-black neighborhoods to invite people to the show (Topor 1972, p. 15). He greeted theatergoers in the lobby before performances; on several occasions, he or his producers babysat for women who had arrived at the theater with small children (Hummler 1972, p. 3LS). He invited black celebrities like Bill Cosby, Ossie Davis, Nipsey Russell, and Diana Sands to appear in the show or host talkbacks afterward. Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm led some talkbacks, and announced her 1972 presidency bid from the stage (Segers 1972, p. 89).

Widely rumored to shutter the week it opened, *Ain’t Supposed to Die* ran on Broadway for ten months, was nominated for and won three Drama Desk awards, and was nominated for seven Tony awards. Capitalized at USD 135,000, it recouped all but USD 4000 of its investment—if also costing Van Peebles about USD 100,000 of his own money in the process.²⁴ Yet he kept a show running on the Great White Way absent of what remains a critical consumer base. Once the reviews “scared off white theatergoers by implying that ‘A Natural Death’ [was] hostile, honky-baiting, or, at best, incomprehensible” (Zimmerman 1972, p. 57), the production was supported for nearly a year by spectators who, producers estimated, were upward of 70% black and overwhelmingly new to Broadway (Hummler 1972, p. LS1). Since Broadway continues to cater to a population that remains approximately

²² A transcript of this review, aired 20 October 1971 via WPIX, is in the clippings file for the production at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.

²³ Typewritten memo held in the clippings file for the production at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.

²⁴ Papers reflecting the show’s budget and finances are held at the Shubert Archive (accessed on 15 May 2019).

80% white despite new efforts toward diversification, it's not hard to argue that Van Peebles was onto something worth remembering.

Then again, if you are met with indifference—or, in this case, racist hostility—by an institution that privileges established members and punishes or erases outsiders, you are guaranteed not to make the kind of mark you should. In this respect, Van Peebles demonstrated that Broadway's playing field was not level to begin with. While scholars and critics tend to root for stylistically innovative if flawed shows by insiders like Stephen Sondheim, fully innovative productions like *Ain't Supposed to Die* rarely get the same kinds of cheerleading, if they get remembered at all.

Mention of *Ain't Supposed to Die* is scant in compendiums and Broadway histories, which never discuss what happened behind the scenes, or present much more than the critical consensus. Contemporary scholars and historians continue to rely on what past critics wrote: the show struggled not because it diverged so radically from typical Broadway fare or had to rely so heavily on alternative models of production, but because it was “intimidating”, “confrontational” (Smith and Litton 1981, p. 328); “plotless”, “curs[ing of] the white race” (Hischak 2008, p. 9); “hostile”, “framed in hatred” (Bordman 2001, p. 740); and “angry” (Hurwitz 2014, p. 187).

Surowiecki notes that while Van Peebles' “ability to finance and produce his work independently offers a model of cultural production that is directed toward a mainstream audience while it shuns the mainstream culture industry,” his “significant but limited success [...] shows how American capitalism can offer a chance for radical work to surface, but little opportunity for it to stay afloat” (Surowiecki 1999, p. 179). Because *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* has been relegated to the dustbin of history reserved for Broadway's vanity productions, Van Peebles' many innovations have been largely overlooked. In recent years, Broadway has ramped up efforts to diversify and appeal to new audiences in ways that often closely mirror Van Peebles' models, but articles that erroneously celebrate more recent majority-black audiences on Broadway as “unprecedented” inadvertently contribute to the erasure of the past, and of the people and productions that have attempted to change its course.²⁵

7. Conclusions

After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, Broadway shut down for two days, resulting in the loss of millions of dollars and an industry-wide scramble to determine not only how, but which shows would go on. Productions that had weak box offices before the attacks—or that had suddenly-unfortunate themes, like a planned revival of Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*—were closed or cancelled before they could open. At the time, there was no shortage of news coverage about productions' stretched (or nonexistent) insurance policies, slow ticket sales, half-empty houses, and struggling shows that could not afford to reopen.²⁶ Yet these financial realities have faded from more recent accounts of those dark times: two decades on, articles memorializing Broadway's response to 9/11 focus almost entirely on the power of art in the face of sorrow, and on the industry's heroic show-must-go-on resolve. As time passes, money has taken a backseat, while memoirists focus instead on Broadway's grit, gumption, and the influence of its artistry to heal a broken city and devastated populace.²⁷

As I write this, Broadway's 41 professional theaters are again closed, this time for a whole lot longer than a mere 48 hours. Like so many other industries across the pandemic-stricken world, the commercial theater business has flopped *en masse*. With no live theater on offer and the Tony Awards postponed indefinitely, the press corps is left to tote up the damage in dollars. No one has any idea what Broadway will look like once it returns to whatever normal will be when the pandemic

²⁵ See for example <https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/09/23/how-slave-play-got-800-black-people-to-the-theatre/> (accessed on 6 April 2020).

²⁶ See for example Jesse McKinley's two articles, “Lights On: Broadway Disperses the Dark” in *The New York Times*, 15 September 2001 and “New York's Theaters and Museums Open in a Bold Resolve to Persevere”.

²⁷ See for example <https://www.americantheatre.org/2018/11/19/how-the-shows-went-on-after-9-11-with-an-assist-from-ovid/> and <https://www.playbill.com/article/a-9-11-reflection-when-the-curtain-came-down-on-the-american-heart-com-330295> (accessed on 6 April 2020).

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