

THE CURSE AND MIRACLE OF MUSICAL THEATRE BOOTLEGS

I don't have many bootlegs. My collection is, in fact, extremely unimpressive, for someone who lives and breathes theatre and whose Spotify is comprised *solely* of Broadway, Off-Broadway, and West End cast recordings.

Bootlegs are illegal recordings of live events, such as musical theatre shows, in a video or audio format. And although this definition is deceptively simple, the world of bootleggers can get very confusing.

I do have some audios and very few videos. I've never sold or bought, or traded anything. But as I go through this small collection of mine, it gets me thinking – I am, technically speaking, breaking the law by possessing them. But are bootlegs necessarily bad? Illegal – sure, but bad? And why is bootlegging musical theatre even a thing in the first place?

BROADWAY ELITISM AND MARKETING

Musicals – especially Broadway musicals – are marketed and advertised as worldwide events, whilst being the literal definition of words “niche” and “elitist”. They are closed for anyone except the lucky few hundred people who bought tickets. And that's fine in and of itself – it's theatre, after all. But simultaneously, they receive marketing comparable to that of Hollywood movies. People fall in love with the music, rare YouTube snippets, and photos, and it is but a small step from finding a video of their new favourite thing. They are not hurting anyone, are they? If anything, it is a non-serious, victimless crime.

Bootleg discussion, trivial as it may seem, is frankly a morality discussion. Aristotle vs Kant discussion. Is bootlegging bad because is stealth and stealth is always bad, no matter the circumstances, or is it justifiable because it doesn't hurt anyone?

One of my friends who shared their experiences with me, Audra, echoes what I am saying: “I don't have enough money to just launch £35 at a theatre ticket”. So does Emīlīja: “I don't really support them. But if I watch one I make sure to pay for the CD recording, that way I feel a little better. For me bootlegs are the only way to see a show since I don't live in UK or USA”.

Another musical theatre aficionado, Honour, admits that it is a very controversial practice. “I usually don’t support them at all because I want to be able to support the actors and the theatre workers but I would only watch them if there isn’t a chance for me to watch it live in Australia because there are a lot of shows which don’t come here and are only on Broadway or in the West End. I haven’t actually watched a bootleg, only clips of them on social media etc. There is so much more context when watching shows than just the cast recording, and if I know the show will be coming to my country soon then I don’t watch them because I love the hidden surprises that the shows have that the recordings don’t”.

HOW IT ALL STARTED

It is hard to pin when bootlegging started, but it goes back quite a while. The word itself initially meant the practice of smuggling illegal items in the legs of tall boots, such as alcohol during the American Prohibition era. And the concept dates back to Shakespeare, whose plays’ unauthorized copies were widely circulated.

There are audios from the original productions of *Hello, Dolly!* and *Funny Girl* (both 1964). There are also easily available videos from the 1970s and 1980s, like [*Evita*](#) (1979) or [*Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*](#) (1982), and even some from the 1950s, such as Ethel Merman in [*Gypsy*](#) (1959).

They used to be recorded on VHS. The only form was sharing was via physical copying, as a result of which, they gradually lost quality. Hence, a lot of bootlegs are today marked by their “generation”, the higher the generation, the more times it’s been copied. It is, of course pretty much useless now, as digital recordings don’t lose quality after being copied, but it remains a memento of a kind. That is also presumably how the word “master” started – it used to mean master recording, aka original recording. As time and technology went by, people started assuming it meant the taper themselves, hence the lofty way bootleggers are called in the community.

The urban legend has it, that many of the old Broadway bootlegs were shot by the same person: Ken Mandelbaum, theatre critic and author of *Not Since Carrie: Forty Years of Broadway Musical Flops* and *A Chorus Line and the Musicals of Michael Bennett*. He would allegedly buy tickets for several of his friends to sit in the middle of them so the ushers could not stop him as it would cause too much turmoil.

One of the anonymous commenters from [the Data Lounge forum](#) tells an anecdote that aptly shows what sorts of lengths could Mandelbaum go for a show he deemed worthy: “He was once caught taping a show at Paper Mill. He had house seats, but, for his purposes, they were too good. So, he found a couple in the rear mezzanine and asked them if they would switch with him. Of course they did. He went upstairs to do his taping. At intermission, house management went to find him in his original seats to invite him backstage. The surprised couple said they switched seats with him. Management found him and took his tape and camera which they returned after the show. Oddly, they didn't throw him out, but you can bet he's not welcome at Paper Mill any longer.”

According to insiders' rumours, he had his people in London – a Malaysian boy named Sukru who recorded shows for him in London in the 1990s. The authorities found out about his lapsed student visa – for he didn't attend any university – went to his apartment and kicked him out. He was apparently deported and banned from returning to the UK for a decade.

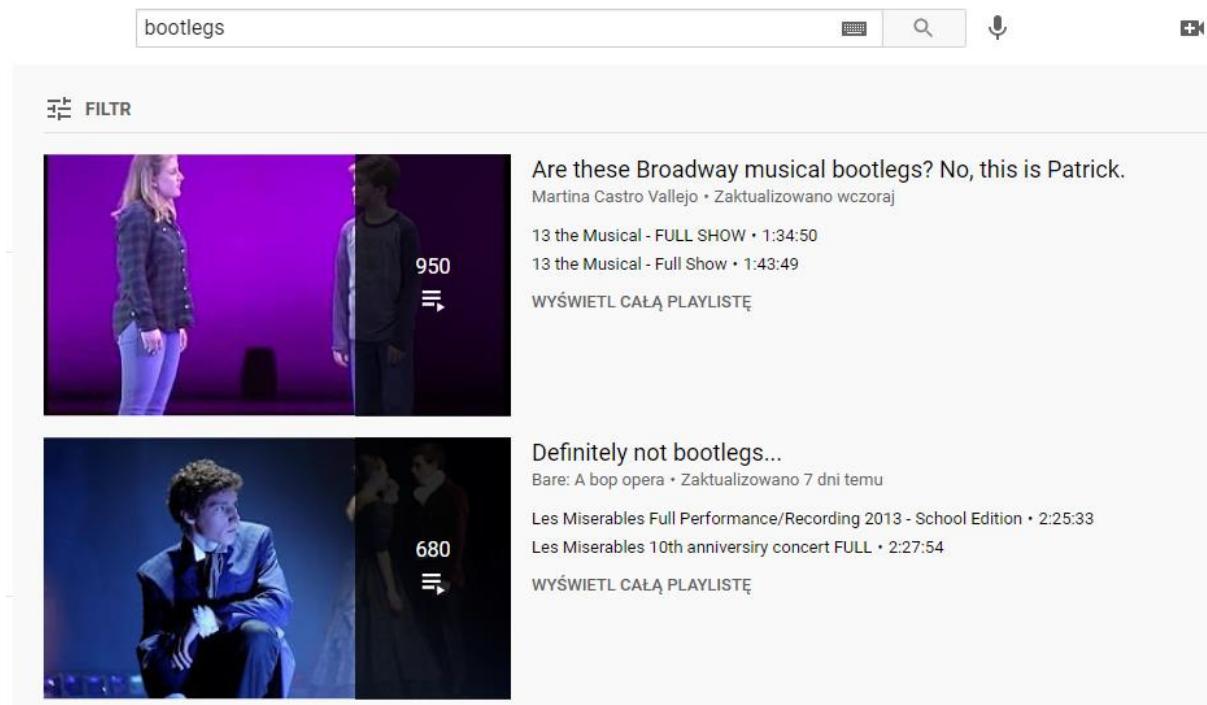
Mandelbaum supposedly taped Carrie – a miracle indeed, given that this show lasted 16 previews and 5 performances. And the revival of Mame, starring Angela Lansbury. Twice. And he would not share anything unless someone offered to trade.

Trading is either exchanging video for video or exchanging video for money. It is much easier now – at least it was, thanks to sites such as Encora, which aimed to catalogue the entire history of recorded Broadway shows, and obviously, facilitate the exchanges. Encora was shut down end of December, allegedly due to its being “too much to handle” for its founder. A team of ex-users is attempting to revive the site or create an equivalent. Another place for trading is the subreddit MusicalBootlegs. Yet another one – and highly popular – were Yahoo groups, which existed for over two decades. One of r/MusicalBootlegs users [says](#): “Back in 1998, the [Yahoo groups] had about 4 messages per month; in 2009 it was over 300; and in 2018 it wasn't even 100.”

WHO RECORDS IT – BOOTLEGGERS

One of the most popular bootleg websites is Stage Dork which contains mainly links to a vast YouTube library of bootlegs. Many of these links don't work anymore – the life of a bootlegger is, after all, a constant race against copyright owners. One of their weapons is creative naming that doesn't get discovered by the algorithm too early. As of January the

3rd, there are playlists such as “Are these Broadway musical bootlegs? No, this is Patrick”, “Definitely not bootlegs...”, and “just slime tutorials not bootlegs”.



Slime tutorial is a code word for bootlegs. A plethora of videos contain photos of slimes in the thumbnails, and their comments are the kind of “great slime tutorial, did it with ease” as a code phrase for “great show, enjoyed it”.

Some of the video titles are: “BMC: Become More-Or-Less Calm” (Be More Chill), “christian borle kills children slime tutorial” (Charlie and the Chocolate Factory), or “little orphan laurie opus falls in love with a gopher prince through song” (2013 Broadway revival of Cinderella). Most of these “mystery” titles cater to people who already are fans of a said show – people who are aware that Christian Borle starred in “Charlie...” and who would easily identify “little orphan laurie” to be a popular and well-loved actress Laura Osnes. One of the more interesting ones is “The place where Laura Benanti got her haircut”, aka Hadestown (because the video was uploaded approximately the same time when a Broadway actress Laura Benanti, better known to wider audiences as a lady who parodied Melania Trump on the Late Show with Stephen Colbert, showed her new hairstyle in a video interview, and no, Laura Benanti has no connections to Hadestown whatsoever) with comments such as

“The saddest part is is that I'm a Greek mythology hairstylist nerd and I know how this hair tutorial ends.”

"I've been watching a lot of slime videos and a hair cut tutorial is a nice change of pace!"

"We don't have this kind of haircuts in Mexico, so thank u for sharing. The final result was so beautiful that I cried"

And the list of songs, containing

"Road to Hair" (Road to Hell)

"Any Way the Dryer Blows" (Any Way the Wind Blows)

"Cut Hair With Me" (Come Home with Me)

"All I've Ever Grown" (All I've Ever Known)

"The Gathering Perm" (A Gathering Storm)

And

"Split Ends Come In" (Doubt Comes In) which is even more ridiculous if you are aware of how Hadestown really ends.



The place where Laura Benanti got her haircut

⇒ Niepubliczny

100 428 wyświetleń • 22 cze 2019

1 2,3 TYS.

444

UDOSTĘPNIJ

ZAPISZ

...

Another weapon is unlisting videos. They are either available only via websites such as Stage Dork, or only via playlists, and therefore are not listed on the uploader's personal YouTube page. This allows them to stay on much longer, even without similarly creative titles. Obviously, in order to find them, one needs to know where to look for them. Another one is uploading videos to Pornhub. Yes, it's a thing.

Yet another one is NFT dates. NFT, not for trade, indicated when a video is set to be released "for the public", either for free or for a set price. It is used because how bootleg is shot gives a good indication of where a person – usually called a master – was sat, and if it gets released too close to filming date, theatre can find out who was a person sitting at this particular place on this date. Chances of this are significantly smaller a few months afterwards.

Claudia (name changed) who'd filmed a few bootlegs in her life, kindly agreed to share her experience with me. "I always feel excited and scared at the same time. I think I just like the adrenaline rush, you know? Also, I am fully aware it's illegal. But at the same time, Phantom [of the Opera] is the best show ever. It is worth preserving. Especially that we don't have professional recordings of the Brilliant Original".

The Brilliant Original is the version staged on Broadway and in the West End pre-pandemic, it is quite literally the original, hardly changed version, as it was conceived by composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and director Hall Prince in 1986. We do have a professional video recording, but it is of version staged in the Royal Albert Hall, directed by Nick Morris and Laurence Connor, similar to the original version, but far from identical.

"I really just think art should be preserved. Also theatre lives only in the moment. So many great performances got lost just because there was no one to record them. It's a shame. At the same time, all the crappy pop concerts get their own videos and people post them on YouTube, and all. It's not fair. Of course it's not the same as seeing it live but it's a next best thing we have".

I personally strongly agree with this point. My all-time favourite musical, Parade, with music and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown, was a huge financial flop when it premiered on Broadway in 1998. Terrible-quality amateur bootleg is everything what's left now. If I could turn back time, would I go and see it live? Of course. But I was three when it closed.

Claudia continues: "I always sit in the middle, so the usher can't catch me. I won't disclose the exact seats, of course! And I'd usually take friends with me, so my neighbours don't see me filming. Though they do, sometimes, and the theatre kicked us out on one occasion."

There were, however a couple of times when she had to delete her recording. There were also a couple of times when she filmed the show at someone's request. "Once it was for a disabled person who couldn't attend the show in person. You know, West End theatres have some provisions for disabled patrons, but not many, really".

She doesn't really capitalize on it, though. "I hardly ever have the ticket price and travel expenses recouped. I do it because, you know, we have all these pop-culture trash now. Theatre SHOULD be accessible, good art SHOULD be accessible".

WHOSE SHOW IS BEING RECORDED – COPYRIGHT OWNERS

Why many people are vehemently against bootlegs is quite obvious. First, they are very illegal, under both American ([17 U.S.C. § 1101](#)) and British ([CDPA s. 198](#)) law. In the US a bootlegger can be punished with a hefty fine, in the UK – even imprisoned for a term not exceeding six months. Second, even if one is sure that they will not get caught whilst committing this illegal act, or are unaware of its illegality – which is quite common, given that a lion's share of bootleg community are teenagers and young adults who simply use the only way of accessing theatre that is available to them – there is a question of morality, or victimlessness, itself. The train of thought goes along these lines: people see bootlegs online, people refuse to see the same show live, shows lose money, shows close, performers lose jobs.

Except it doesn't work this way.

A brilliant industry blog, The Producer's Perspective, gives us some [interesting data](#) on how professional film adaptations affect ticket sales.

Chicago

Average gross 6 months prior to movie: \$463,921

Average gross 6 months after movie: \$536,366

Difference: +\$72,445 or +15.6%

Mamma Mia

Average gross 6 months prior to movie: \$843,472

Average gross 6 months after movie: \$996,379

Difference: +\$152,907 or +18.1%

Phantom of the Opera

Average gross 6 months prior to movie: \$629,255

Average gross 6 months after movie: \$729,316

Difference: +\$100,061 or +15.9%

Rent

Average gross 6 months prior to movie: \$378,019

Average gross 6 months after movie: \$529,353

Difference: +\$151,334 or +40%

Hairspray

Average gross 6 months prior to movie: \$620,845

Average gross 6 months after movie: \$735,373

Difference: +\$114,528 or +18.4%

The Producers

Average gross 6 months prior to movie: \$802,355

Average gross 6 months after movie: \$725,249

Difference: -\$77,106 or -9.6%

It shows a pretty clear tendency – an overall average increase of as much as 16.4%.

Now, of course, this data refers to professional film adaptations of said musicals. They, however, have a huge advantage over bootlegs – not only are they widely advertised, but also offer *your very own* experience. Watching a bootleg is always, unavoidably, watching

someone else's experience. We can safely assume that blurry, lacklustre, amateur recording made with someone's iPhone won't ruin the entire Broadway business.

Another interesting fact is that the most bootlegged shows seem to be the most popular shows, such as Hamilton or Wicked. Finding a recording of these two is as easy as googling it. The copyright owners behind Wicked seem to be extremely lenient with bootleggers – there are entire YouTube channels that post audio and video versions of "Defying Gravity" sung by different actresses. Needless to say, the show's popularity didn't fade over the past 15 years it's been on stage. Throughout most of its run in 2019 it was well exceeding its potential gross, amassing more than 3 million dollars (!) in the week following New Year's Eve of 2019.

WHO IS BEING RECORDED – ACTORS

Performers don't like bootlegs, generally speaking. "I hate. I absolutely hate it. It's copyright infringement, it's theft, it's distracting." says Lianne, young performer from Los Angeles.

Lesli Margherita, who won an Olivier award over a decade ago, tweeted in a pretty dramatic fashion: "My Father NEVER got to see me on Bway and I NEVER let him see a bootleg before he died- why? BECAUSE THAT WASNT SEEING HIS DAUGHTER IN PERSON ON BROADWAY-that was seeing his daughter on a BOOTLEG VIDEO. Yes he could afford it- he was too ill – BOOOOO YOU".



Daniel Goldstein, associate director at Come From Away on Broadway went even further, comparing bootlegs to child pornography: "One could make the same argument about child porn. You didn't film it. No crime in watching.... The actors, designers, writers, directors do NOT give you consent to view their work without paying. Your viewing it without paying violates my rights, my work, my ideas. It is exactly the same".



Replies to 3 others

Retweets 1

Likes 1

Shares 1

Vivienne, actress from Leeds "It's literally my job. I want to get paid for doing it. If you didn't pay, you have no right to see me. Simple as this". Her friend, Mary, adds "You don't sell a reproduction as original Da Vinci, right? Same with us. It's not us in the recording. It's the shade of what we do"

For some, it brings painful memories. Mo Brady, who was a replacement ensemble member in the Addams Family on Broadway, [says](#) "And as I watched the 2011-version of myself falling out of turns and singing occasionally pitchy solos in front of 1,400 paying customers, I started to feel shitty all over again. It's embarrassing to be handed an opportunity to achieve a dream (in this case, performing in a Broadway ensemble) and feeling like you didn't rise to the challenge."

Some of them more or less directly support bootlegs. Karen Olivo, Tony Award winner, asked her fans on Instagram if they have any of bootlegs of her in Moulin Rouge, so she can watch it and that she won't "rat them out" if they send it to her.



Lena Hall, best known for playing Yitzhak/Hedwig in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* posted a clip from a bootleg as a part of some show-related announcement, telling her fans that she “found this gem online” and to “enjoy”. Peggy Gordon, original cast member in *Godspell*, posts bootlegs on her [YouTube channel](#).



WHO WATCHES IT – THE AUDIENCE

I have talked to a few people active in the online musical theatre community. Keira, British theatre student, says “that’s a tough topic because as a performer, I understand the issue with them, but then for example older casts, original Broadway or West End casts etc or older shows that are no longer in theatre, I watch them. Or shows I wouldn’t have the

opportunity to see". In some cases, bootleg even convinced her to see the show live "American Idiot. I wasn't gonna go to but I watched a bootleg and really enjoyed it so ended up seeing it on tour in Bradford". So did poisonivy2 from Broadwayworld, one of industry's biggest and oldest internet forums: "So in 2016 I ran across a bootleg of Waitress. I was intrigued and bought a ticket. I ended up making 6 trips to the diner before the show finally closed. Same with Dear Evan Hansen. So many shows where a bootleg snippet got me to buy a ticket. Can't tell you how much money I've probably forked over because I saw a bootleg of that show."

Emilia did the same: "I did watch Waitress when I had the chance! I went to London specifically to see a show. I honestly wish theatre productions would release professional recordings, I know it doesn't compare to seeing a show live but it would make many people whom can't actually get to the place very happy". So thinks Christine: "I do try to make donations to the actors fund regularly or buy the cast album like someone else said, but I do think if we had more proshots the bootleg issue would be lessened. I think it can make sense for producers to wait until after original cast leaves before releasing the proshot if they're worried about cannibalizing sales (even though I don't think that'll necessarily happen) and then have some of them come back whenever they need a boost (like Sara Bareilles did with Waitress). And for people who aren't sure if they like musical theater, a \$20 movie ticket or \$8 streaming subscription is a lot easier to justify rather than a \$150 ticket for something you're not sure you'll like". Darline even says "This could be turned into an international thing and not only have Broadway shows but also productions from all over the world".

Audra goes even further: "I personally swear by bootlegs. Not proud of it but I can't exactly see shows, so it keeps me sane. And it DEFINITELY wouldn't stop me from seeing a show in person. I watched a Hamilton bootleg before I saw it and I don't feel my experience was worsened by the bootleg I watched. And it definitely didn't dissuade me from seeing it. I'd see it again in a heartbeat."

"I feel like bootlegs help prepare me for the magic I'll witness once I see a show in person" adds Dustin.

It takes us back to the heart of the problem – Broadway is elitist, and there are scarce professional video recordings available. Dozens upon dozens of people – mainly young people – are fixated on the show they could possibly never afford.

BOOTLEG PREVENTION

Another issue is, what should theatres do about people bootlegging shows? Create a blacklist? Whilst that might be noble in eyes of those who subscribe to Aristotelian principles, it is frankly not very viable. It would require airport-like face recognition equipment, not to mention collecting personal data from a culprit in question. Then, production companies would have to share these data among themselves, which is also a potentially illegal thing to do. And lately, they would have to share these data with third parties, like ticket resellers.

There is, in fact, a technology created to make bootlegging nigh on impossible – Yondr pouches. It is a phone case that is given to a patron by an usher before they enter the auditorium. Even though audience members have their phones on them all time, they can't use it – the pouch can be opened only either by an usher or at an unlocking point, outside of the house, usually in the lobby. It's already widely used at concerts, and both West End and Broadway start to implement it. The bottom line is that Yondr pouches don't really protect audiences and performers from the phones ringing – if a patron forgot to switch the alarm off, Yondr pouch would only exacerbate the problem. It protects the show from being recorded.

A PHONE-FREE SHOW

HOW THIS WORKS



①

CASE

As you enter the venue, your phone will be placed in a Yondr case.



②

LOCK

Once inside, the case will lock. You'll keep your phone throughout the show.



③

UNLOCK

To use your phone, tap it on any unlocking base in the lobby.

Is there an easy way to stop people from illegally recording shows? Of course. It's called "filming shows professionally". And though it wouldn't probably eliminate bootlegs completely, it would definitely diminish the scale of this phenomenon.

As even a hardcore fan – like myself – can see the obvious technical shortcomings of the bootleg. It is literally impossible to judge anyone's performance based on bootleg alone. Not only for the reason that they might have had a bad day, but the very process is inherently flawed. First, consumer equipment – such as a mobile phone – will never capture the entirety of the sound. Their microphones are designed for speech and audio calls. And they are relatively cheap, and very, very cheap, compared to professional microphones. Another reason is applying the inverse square law to sound waves. Certain frequencies are recorded better than others. Lower tones sound better than high tones. Close sounds sound better than faraway sounds. Hence the fundamentally wrong assumptions about vocal abilities of certain actors, as they are often getting overpowered by someone talking in the audience, or parts of stage designs, or other actors who happened to be closer to the "master".

I don't even remember when I watched my first bootleg. In our super-niche, super-small Polish musical theatre community, bootlegs were the only thing that gave us any understanding of the world's biggest stages. On one Phantom of the Opera forum, where I was a very active user in my teenage years, we used to watch a bootleg every two weeks or so, and then discuss differences in character portrayals ad infinitum.

BROADWAY ELITISM AND STATISTICS

At its core, this debate is a socioeconomic issue. According to [Broadway League](#), in the 2018–2019 season, only 19% of Broadway admissions were made by tourists from abroad, and it was the all-time high number of foreign visitors. Another all-time high was the number of non-Caucasian attendees, which amounted to the whopping 25%. The average age of the attendee was 42.3 years old. Of theatregoers age 25 or older, 81% had completed college. Their average annual household income was \$261,000.

Average ticket price was \$145.60, or \$122.73 according to [Statista Research Department](#). And it increased significantly from 2010 to 2019. The difference is \$34.43 for Broadway musicals and \$41 for Broadway plays.

In other words, it's still a rich game.

And the best part? Broadway shows ARE recorded. For archival purposes. And put in the TOFT - Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, a collection within the Billy Rose Theatre Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Accessing them is difficult enough – one literally has to go to the NYC, get a library card, give a purpose as to why you wish to see that particular show, and then they are only allowed to watch it there, in the library. According to my American friends, it got even more difficult in recent years.

Why don't they make it public is quite obvious – there are lots of old shows in there, and the library would have to have a contract with everyone involved in making of each of these shows which is nigh on impossible. But why make it even more inaccessible than it is now, remains a mystery to me. Isn't theatre created with the very purpose of being watched? One of the most popular theatre theories (by Susan Bennett) even says that theatre literally doesn't exist without audience. So, in a philosophical sense, TOFT collection doesn't exist.

Obviously, seeing a recorded show is not the same as seeing the show live. That is why sports events are broadcasted worldwide, and people still pay for tickets to see them in person. That is why pop stars record their concerts and yet, their live performances sell out in minutes. People are aware that capturing aura and atmosphere around arts is impossible. But simultaneously, we don't have any better way to preserve these shows so they don't get lost in history. As Alison Myers of Daily Utah Chronicle [said](#), "it would be better to capture a piece of the action so that those on the outer wings can witness a small part of it".

BEST OF THEATRE TO WATCH ONLINE

Since bootlegs are still very much illegal, and theatres are still very much closed, we hardly have any choice but to focus on theatre that is available fully legally online. Whilst some of the shows aren't available to watch for free, most profits go to various organizations supporting performers and creatives in this tough time. The list is divided into two parts – shows, and channels and platforms. As with everything online, no one can say for sure how long anything is going to stay on, but I did my best to make this list as evergreen as possible.

It is, of course, inconclusive and subjective. There are so many shows online at the moment – especially fringe shows that are reasonably easy to record and have a relatively low number of right holders. I strived to choose the very best ones.

SHOWS

[Richard II by Swinging the Lens](#) – the first all-women-of-colour Shakespeare on British stages. Or so they claim. In any case, it's a very unique take on this classic history play.

Disney Cruise Line's musicals, such as [Frozen](#) and [Tangled](#). These hour-long, simplified stage versions of Disney classics are, in fact, quite popular and quite ingenious. Shame that Disney doesn't post names of cast members.

[My Favorite Broadway: The Leading Ladies](#) – one of the best Broadway concerts ever, it is famous for at least two reasons. First, it is a definition of singing excellency. Second, at the time of its premiere – in 1998 – it was praised for its "[celebration of such up-and-comers](#)" as Audra McDonald, Marin Mazzie, and Linda Eder – all very famous performers nowadays.

[Myth: The Rise And Fall Of Orpheus](#) – a modern retelling of the famous myth focuses on rock music, mental illness, and addiction, and its plot echoes stories of Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, and other stars who passed away young.

[Timpson: The Musical](#) – hilarious and over-the-top retelling of Romeo and Juliet in the world of Timpson shoe repair. After a winning streak on Edinburgh Fringe, it is now available online

[Trouble in Tahiti](#) – a brilliant production of Leonard Bernstein’s one-act opera satire, produced by Opera North

[Ghost Quartet](#) – uploaded by the composer himself, Dave Malloy, most known for Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812. A musical song cycle that spans seven centuries is clever, unique, and like everything Malloy, musically stunning.

[The Space Between](#) – lockdown show by David Hunter and Caroline Kay who released their new brainchild without ever meeting in person (they communicated solely over Whatsapp). The video is arranged with musical supervision by Nick Barstow, cello by Imogen Halsey, and mixing and mastering by Joe Davison of Auburn Jam Music.

[Scenes from Angels in America](#) – complex, symbolic and metaphorical play by Tony Kushner, is available for free in a simplified version featuring a fantastic cast including Glenn Close, Alan Cumming, Whoopi Goldberg, Jake Gyllenhaal, Vella Lovell, and Patti LuPone among others. It supports amfAR’s Fund to Fight Covid-19. Absolutely brilliant.

[Take Me to the World: A Sondheim 90th Birthday Celebration](#) – One of the most important events of lockdown theatre was the 90th birthday of genius composer and lyricist, one of the most important figures in 20th-century musical theatre, Stephen Sondheim. This online concert featuring Broadway’s greatest and most beloved will go down in history for sure.

[Violet](#) – a wonderful production of this great musical by Jeanine Tesori. A moving story of a young woman who embarks on a bus journey to be healed. Starring Kaisa Hammarlund and Matthew Harvey.

CHANNELS AND PLATFORMS

[Team StarKid](#) – this super talented group of young performers, who already managed to produce twelve musicals, distributes their works mainly via their YouTube channel. Very entertaining indeed.

[BroadwayHD](#) – possibly the most popular “theatre Netflix” with many big titles available, including She Loves Me, Kinky Boots, Into the Woods, and 42nd Street. Subscription from the UK is \$10.79/month.

[Shakespeare's Globe's YouTube Channel](#) uploads a new play every few months – and they are audio-described to make them as accessible as possible. The Globe also has [its own](#)

[platform](#) where you can access any play at any time, albeit for a small fee (£5.99 rent, £11.99 own for most shows)

[Edinburgh Festival Fringe](#), the world's largest arts festival uploaded a plethora of plays that were supposed to happen but didn't due to its cancellation because of the pandemic.

[Royal Opera House's YouTube channel](#) is a gem. With new operas and ballets uploaded regularly, and many backstage features, it is the one to keep an eye on.

[The Show Must Go On\(online\)](#) series by Rob Myles. Wonderful readings of Shakespeare plays by brilliant actors, much more entertaining than it may seem on the surface.

[Digital Theatre](#) is another platform with some interesting shows available: Don Giovanni from Opera North, The Crucible from Old Vic, starring Richard Armitage, and Much Ado About Nothing with David Tennant. Subscription is £9.99 per month.

[Marquee TV](#) is another theatre Netflix. It has a lot of shows by Royal Shakespeare Company, Classic Spring's Oscar Wilde Season, multiple operas from Royal Opera House, Arena Di Verona, Teatro Real, and Glyndebourne, as well as Bolshoi and The Royal ballets. A monthly subscription is £8.99.

[National Theatre at Home](#) offers a wide range of truly amazing shows it produced over the years. War Horse, Dara, Coriolanus starring Tom Hiddleston, or Phedre with Helen Mirren are but a few from a huge variety NTaH offers its subscribers. A monthly subscription is only £9.98.

[Stage2View](#) has some big musicals (most of them are available on BroadwayHD), but also a nice choice of niche, original, fringe shows, such as Ruthless! The Musical, Hetty Feather, and The Toxic Avenger. The rent is £4.99 per show.

[Matthew Bourne dance company](#), New Adventures, offers some of its stunning performances for streaming. Bourne is the world's leading dance choreographer and winner of multiple Laurence Olivier Awards. Each show costs £9.99 to buy and £5.99 to rent.

[Opera Vision](#) is a project supported by the European Union's Creative Europe programme, that connects opera houses all over Europe. In its repertoire are such gems as Prima

Donna by Royal Swedish Opera, Turandot by Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, The Tales of Hoffman by Komische Oper Berlin, and Fidelio by Birmingham Opera Company. All are free to watch.

YOUNG CREATIVES AGAINST COVID-19 – HOW THE NEW LOST GENERATION BATTLES THE EFFECTS OF A PANDEMIC

We live in unprecedeted times. At the start of 2021, these words sound like an unfunny cliché. And yet, there are – sadly – very much true. Theatre on both sides of the pond alarms about its vulnerability, arts are, after all, deemed a non-essential service. Countless fund-raisers are organised to help the sector. The recent one – socially-distanced production of Ratatouille The Musical – raised approximately £732,000 for a US actors charity.

Impressive as it is, there is one demographic who is constantly omitted – though it'd be more poignant to say “forgotten” – in the initiatives: theatre school students and young professionals. People who oftentimes paid tens of thousands of dollars and pounds in order to learn theatre craft from the very best have classes moved online, gigs cancelled, no chance for reimbursement due to lack of stage of experience and no chance to obtain this experience.

Allyson Green, dean of New York University Tisch School of the Arts, one of the world's most prestigious drama schools, apparently tired with an email back and forth regarding compensation for extraordinarily high ([about \\$60.000 per year](#)) tuition fees for aggrieved students, responded by sending a truly embarrassing [video of herself](#) dancing and lip-syncing to R.E.M.'s “Losing My Religion”. NYU Local, a popular university blog, responded with understandable directness “We get it. You're stressed. It's a stressful time. People are mad, a lot of them at you. But what the f*** are you doing???”.

Because here's the thing – you really can't teach theatre online. It's simply not possible. Sure, you can teach certain things online, but acting is a physical job, a craft. Without a hands-on approach, it disintegrates. Lauren Knight, theatre journalist and Drama student at Claire Trevor School of the Arts puts it neatly [in her post](#) at the Onstage blog, one of the most popular industry websites: “I can't reach out and touch the hand of my scene partner through a computer screen”.

“I was booked from March 2020 through Summer 2021. It would have given me 5 of my required 6 apprenticeships to join the [Canadian Actors' Equity Association] (and I

already had the other one), and I've had each and every gig cancelled entirely" Troy, young stage manager from Ottawa, tells me. And getting these gigs booked is not an easy task, even under normal circumstances, given [the strict rules CAEA is imposing](#) on the show's eligibility as well as the fact that you have to pay for it to count towards the membership. And in North American theatre, even more so than in British ones, it is Equity membership that opens all the doors – it is nigh on impossible to play in the biggest, most respectable theatres without it. Regional regulations suddenly pose a problem, too. "A few of them have offered me my position back because they plan on still doing this season when it's safe to do so, but most of them do not know when they'll be back to full operation, and even then, with the guidelines varying province to province, they don't know if they'll be able to hire artists from outside their districts".

In a similar vein, American prospective student, Ffiona, tells me about her plans to study in London: "I was all set to audition for drama schools in London (literal dream programs) and due to the international travel restrictions I never made it over to the UK to give it a shot". But even in her own country, finding a programme that will give her decent job opportunities is far from easy "I was accepted to several drama programs in NYC. I absolutely love the school and was supposed to be there now but COVID was forcing 2/3 of classes to zoom and the restrictions and extra costs were too much for us" what forced her to defer her training and "the real start of my career" until next year.

The UK Federation of Drama Schools responded to sudden challenges with polite yet essentially meaningless [fluff](#): "The health and wellbeing of our students and colleagues is of vital importance and it is essential that we remain connected to our students and united as a community of artists in pursuit of shared solutions, support of one another, and the continuation of our collective ethos, standards and values".

Drama, theatre and performance is indeed about human interactions. But it's also, all the lofty word aside, about plugging in the right sort of lights. Knowing the difference between active and passive speakers. Not overheating the fog machine. Not the sort of things you want to learn via Zoom. "I'm a techie so even though they're doing some shows on zoom, there's nothing I can contribute to them" says Alexis, young American student. "In addition to that, I'm taking a design and technical theatre course and am having to learn all of these hands-on things in a virtual format".

That and, well, young actors are people too. Fully aware of how difficult and competitive their chosen field is and usually fighting their own demons. The bizarre society notion that actors are uniformly fun, loud and very confident is proven even more unrealistic under current circumstances. One of my friends, Mexican performer Sandy, tells me about her fears: she was taking a theatre class – the only one her university offers. “And when everything moved online, that class did too”. Every week the students were supposed to videotape themselves doing the assigned activities. “Which was really weird, I was really afraid of doing anything in front of a camera, I love live theater and somehow I’m less scared when I do it live. So I ended up sending a video every week but I hated doing it and it was really hard for me to adapt”. Her hopes for a breakthrough part were gone as well: “We didn’t do our final presentation and I was really hoping to get a bigger part this time”.

Emily from Kentucky says: “I was in the middle of a contract - children’s theatre gig – when schools closed down. Since we had a contract with the schools the theatre company really wanted to help fulfil our actor contracts and the schools so after a two month break of not knowing if schools were going to go back they decided to record our show with us via zoom”.

Sounds easy. Not so much to organise, though.

“The other 2 actors and myself and one other person met up at the theatre and set up in different rooms and spent a whole day recording over Zoom with our Director phoning in from her home.”

Then, schools that had the performance booked received the recording. And the artists did get paid per showing of the video – so it ended up working out. Not only that, Emily started her own company to meet the novel demand for virtual theatre. She was also a part of a virtual fundraiser for her friends theatre company and even did costumes for a socially distanced summer camp. Kids had to wear masks and only 10 of them could be on stage at the same time – they recorded their performance without an audience and then started selling the online stream.

Whilst a lot of performers seem to be stuck on the loss of live theatre, Emily stays positive: “I think it will eventually lead to even more work for actors and will take away the elitism of theatre making it accessible to all social classes. I have to admit that the idea of virtual theatre becoming a permanent part of my life is very exciting”.

Sandy had a similar experience: “One of my friends makes music and last year she asked me to be the lead for one of her videos. It was really cool but when the pandemic came she had to get creative and created a miniseries that she recorded by making zoom meetings. I really enjoyed acting again”.

“I'm a sophomore theatre design tech major” says Skylar, student from the States. He was on Spring break in New York when the world closed, and took their musical with it. He was supposed to do an internship this summer, but he had to cancel it due to fears for his own health and safety. Even though he is amongst “the .01% in my industry technically employed as I work in the costume shop for work study”, he fears for the industry: “People beg for entertainment, but won't do anything to bring it back or stop it from tanking”.

South Carolina theatre faculty decided to reach out to their prospective students and offered [free online workshops](#) to high schoolers that took place in May 2020. Not only did they aim to help students but also – or maybe, first and foremost – secondary school drama teachers, showing solidarity with them in this challenging time. And they want the online workshops to stay for good – even when the education comes back to schools.

Tad better does the situation look for the younger student. Many a company moved their services online and came up with new, creative solutions. With [Disney Theatrical's free education programmes](#), children can recycle common items with The Lion King and rewrite this famous story through the eyes of Nala; explore five Aladdin-themed activities to inspire creative writing; make a kite with Mary Poppins or write their own song lyrics after analysing Let It Go from Frozen. Lincoln Center for Performing Arts offers [Lincoln Center Pop-Up Classroom](#) which is an online activity open for students forced to continue their arts education virtually. All streams are archived and available on demand and the topics include dance lessons, narrative voice workshops, creating puppets from simple at-home objects, making woven works of art with recycled material among other “making the best of the situation” sort of activities. [Dramaversity](#) is another place that has been connecting professional artists to drama students via Zoom video conferencing since 2018. The online platform allows artists to design their own courses, set the price and class size, and choose when they want to teach. Among the opportunities is a masterclass with a Tony winner Beth Leavel.

In New Zealand, year 12 and 13 students from [Whangarei Girls High School](#) decided to share their common experience through creating Covid-19 snapshot show that offered a broad picture of the life of the nation before, during and after New Zealand's seven week lockdown. The show included insights from the Prime Minister, Jacinda Adern, as well as Jenny from Invercargill and her first meeting with British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. They mentioned the emotional connection being weakened as a result of anti-COVID measures implemented – during last lockdown in New Zealand, drama students were banned from breathing towards each other.

"I found crisis after crisis being shouldered by young people. Through their theatre-making, they documented their concerns and hope, and they rallied around common purposes. They did this despite disagreement and difference" for The Conversation [explains](#) Kathleen Gallagher from the University of Toronto who conducted collaborative ethnographic research with 250 young people in drama classrooms in Canada, India, Taiwan, Greece and England. "People are making sense of the inexplicable or the feared through art, using online platforms for public learning. Art has become a point of contact, an urgent communication and a hope".

"The government has really failed us- all generations and it's tough. I think everyone's just super excited for Christmas now because it's an escape and a little happiness during this time. I'll definitely appreciate and love it more than last year" my friend and performer Gracie tells me. It appears to be a feeling shared universally – everyone is tired, exhausted even. Christmas 2020 surely was different than any other in our lifetimes. But we remain hopeful – in Franklin D. Roosevelt's words, "we cannot always build a future for our youth, but we can always build our youth for the future".