

Broadway as National Cultural Representation

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Sociologists have long considered the relationship between art and the society which produces and consumes it. There exists a loop in which artists respond to the events and atmosphere of their cultural environment and, in turn, their art impacts that environment with its commentary and the reflection that it engenders. Since ancient times, theatre has participated in this socio-artistic loop. The centrality of theatre in society is not a new concept; it has existed in various forms through theorists from Alexis de Tocqueville to Bertolt Brecht. Even so, the sociology of theatre remains a relatively unexplored field. As a student of both disciplines, this intersection has always interested me. Recently, with the intensity and polarization of the American sociopolitical climate, I have found it increasingly urgent to investigate the theatre being written and staged, and to do so through a sociological lens.

This summer, I spent five weeks in New York City, watching Broadway productions from the 2018-2019 season and interviewing actors, directors, and producers associated with them. I believe that these plays and musicals, about topics ranging from the Constitution (*What the Constitution Means to Me*) to “the whole being dead thing” (*Beetlejuice*) together create a snapshot of the focuses and concerns of Americans in this moment. I will use this research in the upcoming school year to create a project about what this snapshot looks like and what it means for American society.

I selected Broadway because it is the largest, most popular, and most lucrative theatre source in the United States. Plays and musicals that make it to Broadway have the chance to become enduring American classics and make millions of dollars. These stakes, and their associated costs, cause producers to invest carefully, based on what they believe will appeal to the most people. The shows on Broadway therefore represent what artists want to write about *and* what audiences want to see in that particular moment. Broadway productions must sell hundreds of tickets eight times per week to stay afloat in this competitive and costly environment. As the most visited and most advertised theatre destination in the United States, Broadway also projects an image of American culture to the rest of the world. It therefore constitutes a strong case study for the interplay of theatre and society in the United States.

In the 2018-2019 season, Broadway provided opportunities to confront and reflect on issues in American society or to spend two hours avoiding them, depending on the show. Some productions tackled immediate topics while others invoked timeless themes. Some showcased the innovations of technology while others withdrew to a pre-digital world. Some will continue changing the lives of audience members while others closed after mere months. From bold new plays to modernized revivals of classic musicals, each production on Broadway this season responded to the American sociopolitical climate in some way. In studying these shows, we can gain a greater understanding of the society in which we live.

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