

Musical Revivals for a New Generation of Audiences

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After the pandemic prevented Broadway from having audiences for over a year and audiences dropping by 50% compared to pre-pandemic times, it is now more important than ever to figure out how to get them back. With the ease and accessibility of streaming services, like Netflix and Disney+, people require more motivation to go out to the theater when they can experience entertainment from the comfort of their homes. Since staging a show is expensive, producers want to invest in projects that will draw large audiences. With several musical revivals on Broadway, it is clearly a genre with which producers have confidence. The question is: why? What do audiences like about musicals? Because of how long ago many of these musicals were written, their books depict outdated social norms and stereotypes. In a time that highly values political correctness, do audiences want revivals to be updated to reflect modern values, or do they want them to stay the same?

My research examined how changes between musical theater productions and their revivals affect the message of works and how new generations of audiences respond to them. Based on my interviews with members of the creative teams for *The Music Man* (2022) and *Funny Girl* (2022), designers generally agree that revivals should be treated like new works. Designs should be based on the intentions of the revival and fit the needs of the particular production. Nevertheless, direction and score changes can significantly affect the message of a revival. With the funding of the Grua O'Connell Research Award, I had the opportunity to travel to New York and stay in a hotel so that I could see *The Music Man* and *Funny Girl* on Broadway. There, I noticed how light-hearted choreography can make a creepy song funny and how new songs and arrangements can make a beloved character seem naive. In New York, I was also able to observe and interview audience members. When selecting a show, people were drawn to familiarity, whether it be a show title or a recognizable actor. Every *The Music Man* audience member, even familiar ones, bought tickets to see Hugh Jackman, but *Funny Girl* audiences were primarily drawn by the story they grew up with, exclaiming that they wanted to see Lea Michele for her talent rather than her name.

Through my research, I learned that audiences choose shows with familiar titles and actors. Then, when at the show, creative choices strongly affect audiences' appraisals of characters and the message of the work. Although productions may choose to lean into nostalgia, changes are often necessary for the audience to properly connect with and appreciate the material. There is no set rule for how familiar audiences will respond to a work. Both familiar looks and innovative concepts have been praised by critics and adored by audiences. So, what makes a revival successful? It depends! Success is less about "what" is presented, and more about intentionality, care, and the alignment of the show's "why", "how", and "for whom". If a show is being revived and marketed toward people who love the musical, the show cannot be conceptually blown apart. The audience is there for nostalgia, not innovation.

Just as musical theater was first created as escapism after the Depression and WWII, it now serves as entertainment for a post-pandemic world. Current audiences are likely to prefer familiar works rather than innovative ones. While they may be less interesting, they are safer. Famous leads then provide additional security for audiences who want to ensure that their purchase is worth their time and resources. If the creative team wants to instead stray from what audiences are familiar with, they will need a strong concept, purposefully chosen, and take care that it is done well. It will need to relate to the contemporary context and be marketed toward an audience that wants to see it. Thus, there is no one way to successfully revive musical theater, but intentionality and care are key.

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