

THEATER

Off Off Off Broadway (at Your Multiplex)

Theater Producers Weigh HD Broadcasts in Movie Theaters

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD JAN. 23, 2014

Coming soon to a movie theater near you: Orlando Bloom!

Yes, I know that's not in itself news. Mr. Bloom is a familiar presence on screens the world over. But in this instance this British actor will not be appearing in a traditional movie, but in an HD broadcast of the Broadway production of "Romeo and Juliet," which ended its run in December. The show will be screened in at least 400 theaters around Valentine's Day, a marketing-friendly date for one of the world's most famous love stories. (Even if the play does end — spoiler alert! — with the lovers dead inside a tomb.)

The screenings are the first offering of a new venture called BroadwayHD, founded by Stewart F. Lane and Bonnie Comley (who were among the Broadway show's producers), which aims to bring the commercial theater aboard the high-definition broadcast bandwagon that has been one of the more intriguing — and successful — new developments in the performing arts over the past decade.

The question, of course, is why it took Broadway so long to join the party.

By now American theater producers have more than enough models to follow. The Metropolitan Opera's performance broadcasts began in 2006 and were an instant hit. The National Theater in London began its own highly popular live series of broadcasts in 2009. Working with the company BY Experience, which handles distribution, they have beamed more than 100 productions of theater and opera to eager audiences around the globe.

Other performing arts organizations have followed suit — the Royal Opera and the Royal Ballet, the Bolshoi, and New York City Ballet, for example. But with a few sporadic exceptions — "Memphis," "Jekyll & Hyde" and the Roundabout Theater Company's "The Importance of Being Earnest" — Broadway has shied away from this booming phenomenon, which could represent a new revenue stream (it

certainly has for the Met) or at least a potent new marketing tool.

Mr. Lane obviously believes there's "gold in them thar hills," as he put it, although he admitted that no one knows exactly how much, if any. He previously worked on a movie-theater broadcast of the New York Philharmonic's production of "Company," with Neil Patrick Harris, and he said that project is close to breaking even.

The economic model is a complicated one — the Broadway unions are notoriously tough negotiators — with considerable risk. But Mr. Lane is optimistic, and his plan is to arrange two or three more broadcasts by the end of the year, although the company has yet to pin those down.

"Technological advances have brought the cost down," he said, adding that he also sees possibilities in media like pay-per-view and live-streaming on the web. "And there is more cooperation from the industry, treating this not as an adversary but as a potential revenue source."

Another venture, Broadway Near You, has the same goal in mind. Founded by Ed Greenberg and Lee deBoer, the company has already filmed an Australian production of "Driving Miss Daisy" starring Angela Lansbury and James Earl Jones and plans to distribute it in the spring. It has also secured first-look deals with producers including Lincoln Center Theater. But despite its title, the company has yet to strike a deal with a Broadway production, and the screening details for "Driving Miss Daisy" have yet to be confirmed.

For audiences unable to get to New York during the run of a show like "Romeo and Juliet," watching a broadcast in a movie theater may be the next best thing. Not everyone with a desire to see, say, Daniel Craig and Rachel Weisz in "Betrayal" can afford to schedule a visit during its brief run. (For that matter, many New Yorkers cannot afford Broadway ticket prices.)

Still, the scattershot attempts to follow National Theater Live and the Met suggest that there is still plenty of head scratching about the financial and philosophical issues behind the idea of canning Broadway for mass consumption.

Julie Borchard-Young, who along with her husband, Robert Borchard-Young, runs BY Experience, said the sheer institutional might of companies like the Met and the National made the process far easier to navigate than it would be for an individual Broadway producer. Ms. Borchard-Young, who knew the Met's general manager, Peter Gelb, from his days at Sony Classical, was the one who initiated conversations about bringing opera to the movie-theater masses.

"Broadway is not a single unified institution that can do all the legwork to prepare the marketplace," she said. "Also, the serial nature is important. When you

have a series of productions, everything from marketing to other costs are easier to handle.”

Before getting the Met’s project off the ground, Mr. Gelb was able to negotiate new contracts allowing the unions to share in any revenue, at a time when no one knew whether there would be any. The results have been more spectacular than anyone could have guessed.

Although it costs roughly \$1 million to produce and distribute each opera, the wide international audience for the Met — some 2,000 screens in 64 countries — means that each opera’s screenings regularly sells 250,000 to 300,000 tickets. The Met takes half of the ticket price of around \$23, meaning that it can more than make back the money.

Yet in a recent interview, Mr. Gelb he was not sure the model could easily be transferred to Broadway. “For a Broadway show that is playing night after night, will a paid transmission somehow kill the run?” he asked. He said he suspected there was a reluctance on the part of producers to take any such risks, Broadway being a risky enough business as it is. And not many producers have piles of extra money to fund the experiment.

Since the HD phenomenon took off, numerous stage producers have approached By Experience about taking their shows out to movie theaters, but often the costs become prohibitive.

In 2011, BY Experience presented “The Importance of Being Earnest,” but Ms. Borchard-Young noted that the funding came not from the Roundabout but from a lone philanthropist interested in having Brian Bedford’s celebrated performance as Lady Bracknell recorded; the show ultimately played to an audience of 35,000 at 155 theaters in 13 countries. The cost of production, according to the Roundabout, was \$500,000. That makes for a slim profit margin — if any.

Todd Haines, the artistic director of the Roundabout, said he was pleased with the experiment, although it has not been repeated. He has had talks with various people, including Mr. Lane, about subsequent productions, but nothing has materialized. And he makes it clear that financing HD presentations is not something he sees as being within the company’s purview.

“My gut feeling is the more people who see theater in any capacity — as long as it’s well done — the more it will help the industry in the long run, in general,” he said. “We get approached by people and asked if we are interested, but nobody seems to come up with the funding. If we were going to risk money, I would rather risk it on theatrical projects.”

Jeffrey Richards, a prolific Broadway producer, also strikes a somewhat

ambivalent note in discussing the possibility. Talks on doing an HD broadcast of the current “Glass Menagerie,” on Broadway featuring Cherry Jones, ultimately never bore fruit, he said.

“The funding is different when you are dealing with opera and ballet stars and nonprofit organizations,” Mr. Richards explained. “I am definitely interested in exploring it, and have discussed it before on shows like ‘The Best Man.’ But there are lots of rights issues involved. The authors or their estates must give permission, the artists onstage must give permission, the behind-the-scenes people need to do it.”

All of which costs money. The BY Experience executives said they recently ran the numbers on distributing a popular Off Broadway production to movie theaters. (They declined to name the show.) But when the total inched toward \$1 million as a result of actor and union costs and other factors (despite the absence of stars), they balked.

Mr. Greenberg contends that creating a reliable series is essential: One reason the National Theater Live and the Met series have been so successful is that they have easy access to numerous productions year in and year out. (Lately, the National Theater Live banner has expanded to include productions from other London theaters like the Donmar Warehouse.)

“We think the key to success is to create a series of shows and build a subscriber base, so that theater lovers all over the country can sign up as they would to subscribe to a theater,” Mr. Greenberg said. His hope is ultimately to present 15 to 20 productions of West End, Broadway and even regional theater annually, and he said he sees signs that resistance from a traditionally slow-to-innovate business is beginning to recede.

“Up until quite recently, there was hostility from the guilds, and that’s not the case anymore,” Mr. Greenberg said. “We have contracts with six of the seven major theater guilds. The industry is embracing this more.” And he believes that far from siphoning away theatergoers from Broadway, wider distribution could boost sales and bring new audiences to theater. National Theater Live showed “One Man, Two Guvnors” in the United States before the National Theater production reopened on Broadway; the same will go for “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,” which is set to open in New York in the fall but was first screened in movie theaters in the fall of 2012.

The question of whether the “live” nature of the Met and National Theater broadcasts remains a signal part of their allure may be proven (or disproved) when “Romeo and Juliet” is screened in February, well after the production closed.

“People love the idea of experiencing the production in real time, or as close to real time as possible,” Mr. Borchard-Young said.

The few National Theater Live screenings I have attended took place at night, long after the actors in London had gone to bed. I can’t say I felt that the delay made much difference, but then again, I left two of the three (“One Man, Two Guvnors” and “Frankenstein”) before the screenings concluded, because I didn’t feel the taped experience was comparable to the live one — and in the case of “One Man,” the live one was coming to Broadway within months.

But I am really not the target audience for the live HD arts experience: Although I rarely get to London, as someone with access to a surfeit of live theater (and opera), I am in a privileged position compared to most theater-loving Americans.

What the simultaneous new ventures make clear, at least, is that there is broad interest in trying to establish a workable model for bringing Broadway shows to wider audiences through the HD medium. And while it is unlikely that long-running hits like “The Book of Mormon” or “Wicked” will go the HD route, the increasing number of star-driven short runs seems to offer an ideal stream of potential product.

“Limited runs and high prices make it impossible for most people to see Broadway theater,” Mr. Greenberg said. “We’re not cannibalizing a show’s audience if the audience never has a chance to see it.”

Correction: February 2, 2014

*An article last Sunday about Broadway producers weighing the potential of HD broadcasts in movie theaters and other venues misstated the given name of the male partner in *BY Experience*, which distributes such broadcasts. He is Robert Borchard-Young — not Richard.*

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