



BROADWAY Bulletin

Dispatches from across the pond with New Yorker Thom Geier

Times are changing when it comes to curtain up, writes our new bi-monthly columnist – who explores how New York theatre is breaking tradition with ever-earlier performances

There are truisms in theatre that veterans have learned to accept as gospel, as dependable as the plunge of the chandelier just before the interval in *The Phantom of the Opera*. Broadway is dark on Mondays. Matinees happen on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Evening performances begin at 8pm.

Not anymore. This past summer, I counted seven shows that offered performances on Monday, including *The Great Gatsby*, the Tony-winning dance show *Illinoise* and the London import *Cabaret* at the Kit Kat Club, as well as tourist-friendly mainstays like *Chicago* and *SIX*. Most of those shows are dark on Sundays instead, though *Chicago* skips performances on Wednesdays – and gives ‘em the old double whammy with two shows on Saturdays and Sundays to wear out its high-kicking ensemble in what amounts to the middle of their work week.

It wasn't so long ago that theatregoers could expect the curtain to go up every night at 8pm – a practice that originated in the 1970s when the Broadway League sought to get audiences into theatres before dark due to worries about crime in the Times Square area where most Tony Award-eligible venues are located. Before that, shows started at 8.30pm – sometimes earlier if it was an especially long show, such as Edward Albee's three-hour *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (which started at 8pm during its original run).

For decades, the 8.30pm curtain time was sacrosanct. In the stage version of the 1930s-set backstage musical *42nd Street*, prima donna Dorothy Brock and chorus girl Peggy Sawyer sing: 'I know I won't be late / 'Cause at half past eight / I'm gonna be



Above Keeping an eye on the time: the Clock Tower in *Back to the Future* **Left** *Water for Elephants* starts at 7pm

there'. And it's no accident that Noël Coward titled his 1936 cycle of one-act plays *Tonight* at 8.30.

Traditional starting times also explain another now-outdated Musical Theatre term: the '11 o'clock number', that show-stopping song toward the end of a musical's second act. Sometimes, these are splashy production numbers with dance flourishes that rope in the entire cast (think 'Brotherhood of Man' from *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* and 'Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat' from *Guys and Dolls*). But typically, the 11 o'clocker is a cabaret-ready solo that allows the lead character to deliver a soaring, full-belt climax that, in traditional musical story terms, fulfils the destiny articulated in that 'I wish' song way back in Act One (for example, 'Rose's Turn' from *Gypsy* or 'Memory' from *Cats*).

These days, that flashy tune is more likely to percolate closer

to 9pm, making it easier for suburbanites, who have been Broadway's bread and butter for decades, to travel home at a more decent hour. 'We're not seeing the same night-owl behaviour of pre-Covid,' says Micah Hollingworth, a former executive with the Jujamcyn theatre group, who specialises in theatre pricing and inventory management.

Many consumers are still working remotely or coming into the city less frequently. Even dining habits have changed, with *The New York Times* reporting that '6pm is the new 8pm' in terms of the most in-demand bookings at top restaurants.

Early-bird performances have been fully embraced by Broadway casts and crews, according to producer Jennifer Costello, whose musical *Water for Elephants* has a 7pm curtain most weeknights. 'Knowing that the curtain comes down at 9.30pm or 9.45pm, the '9' in front of that as opposed to the '10' is

a big psychological difference,' she says. 'You feel like you still have something of an evening'.

Admittedly, there can be some confusion for old-timers accustomed to how things used to be. And forget about consistency in scheduling. While *Hamilton* and *The Book of Mormon* begin all evening shows at 7pm, most shows have two or even three different starting times, depending on the day of the week. This fall, the performance schedule for *The Outsiders*, *Hell's Kitchen* and *The Notebook* even varies from week to week. If you don't check very carefully and keep your digital calendar up to date, you may struggle to get yourself into the room where it happens.

Experimentation with show times seems to be the new norm. Cole Escola's hilarious (non-musical) comedy *Oh, Mary!*, about Mary Todd Lincoln in the run-up to her husband's assassination, has back-to-back performances at 5pm and 8.30pm on Thursdays and Saturdays (the show is dark on Wednesdays). That late-afternoon show is a boon for theatre tourists who can slip an extra show into a packed schedule, and for employees who might be tempted to sneak out of work a little early rather than attend a more traditional early-afternoon Wednesday matinee. The show also has the advantage of running at a fleet 80 minutes, allowing a relatively quick turnaround time between performances.

'For every stakeholder on Broadway, the word is flexibility,' says Kevin McCollum, a veteran Tony-winning producer whose current shows, *The Notebook*, *SIX*, and *Oh, Mary!*, are at the bleeding edge of the new trend. 'Theatre is about showing up. We have to listen to when audiences want to be entertained'. **M**

The '11 o'clock number' is more likely to percolate at 9pm, making it easier for suburbanites to take a train home

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman