



# BROADWAY Bulletin

Dispatches from across the pond with New Yorker Thom Geier

The neon lights may burn bright on Broadway, but our columnist notes that Off Broadway is producing luminous musical hits in much smaller spaces (and for a fraction of the cost)

New York theatre doesn't just happen on Broadway. The word has become a catch-all for the city's stage scene, but it technically refers to a collection of a mere 41 theatres mostly plopped within a dozen or so blocks of midtown Manhattan. There are scores of other venues throughout the city mounting productions that aren't eligible for Tony Awards simply because of their location and seat count.

Many of these theatres are non-profits that produce work for limited runs, some of which then transfer to the Main Stem. The Public Theater has been the glistening Off-Broadway launchpad for classics from *A Chorus Line* in 1975 to *Hamilton* in 2015 to last year's *Hell's Kitchen*, while companies like Second Stage (*Dear Evan Hansen*), the New York Theatre Workshop (*Hedestown*), the Atlantic Theater Company (*Kimberly Akimbo*) and Playwrights Horizons (*A Strange Loop*) have all initiated Tony Award-winning musicals in the last decade.

But there are plenty of commercial Off-Broadway venues mounting long-running musical hits with no apparent plans to jump to the big time. Consider *Titanique*, the hilarious send-up of the James Cameron movie blockbuster reimagined as a vessel for a highly fictionalised Céline Dion and her earworm-heavy song catalogue. The show, which docked in London in December, has been delighting audiences for more than two years at the 300-seat Daryl Roth Theatre, located 30 blocks south of Times Square.

Meanwhile, the Westside Theatre, a 270-seat auditorium situated a few blocks west of Broadway in the Hell's Kitchen



**Above** Off-Broadway's star-studded *Little Shop* revival  
**Left** *Titanique* is a huge hit blocks from the Main Stem

neighbourhood, has been home to a rollicking revival of *Little Shop of Horrors* that opened in pre-shutdown 2019 with a cast featuring Jonathan Groff and Christian Borle. Since the pandemic, there has been a rotating roster of stars familiar to Broadway and TV fans alike (Evan Rachel Wood, Jeremy Jordan, Maude Apatow) – the kind of stunt-casting you might expect from a Broadway mainstay like *Chicago*.

It's a fitting homecoming for *Little Shop*, writer/lyricist Howard Ashman and composer Alan Menken's doo-woppish adaptation of the cheesy 1960 B-movie, which got its start in a tiny Off-Off-Broadway space in 1982. The show then had a five-year run at the Orpheum Theatre in the East Village (the longtime home of the percussive hit *Stomp* and recently the site of *The Big Gay Jamboree*, a new musical from some of the same creative team behind *Titanique*). While *Little Shop*

did get a Broadway revival in 2003 that ran for about a year, the show's roots are closer to 'Skid Row' (as the girl group chorus sings in Act One) than the bright lights of Times Square.

For producers, the appeal of Off Broadway is about more than just aesthetics – though many prefer the less polished, fringe-like vibe for certain shows, as well as the younger demographic. It's also easier to fill Off-Broadway spaces, which are smaller than Broadway houses (which run the size gamut from the 597-seat Hayes Theatre to the 1,933-seat Gershwin, where *Wicked* has been playing since 2003). New World Stages, a subterranean Off-Broadway complex with five auditoriums that range from 200 to 499 seats, hosts both the long-running *Drag: The Musical* and the London-imported comedy *The Play That Goes Wrong*, which transferred to New World Stages in 2019 after a nearly two-year run on Broadway. Both have a scruffier sensibility that suits Off Broadway.

Both are also significantly cheaper to produce than they would be just one block east. In addition to steep theatre rental fees, Broadway productions also come with strict union-negotiated rules governing cast and crew salaries, load-in costs for sets, rehearsal times and even the minimum number of musicians you need to hire for your orchestra.

*Oh, Mary!*, comedian-actor-writer Cole Escola's hit non-musical comedy with just five actors, cost a modest \$1.2 million to produce Off Broadway – but the capitalisation leapt to \$4.5 million when it graduated to Broadway's Lyceum Theatre last summer (in November, it became the first Broadway show of the 2024-25 season to turn a profit). That's one reason why some recent London transfers have eschewed Broadway for more economical runs further from Times Square.

Audiences also benefit from this quirk of real estate. There are no nosebleed seats in theatres this small, and there's an intimacy that brings you closer to the action. Plus, tickets are significantly cheaper. (*Little Shop* was recently offering prime seats for \$58 – while even a struggling Broadway musical like *A Wonderful World* charged twice that amount for chairs in the upper balcony.) Plus, you often get to see shows, and performers, before they go mainstream. I'll never forget the exhilaration of watching *Fun Home*'s original run at the Public, or the surprise of seeing how *Buena Vista Social Club* – due to open on Broadway this spring after a successful 2023 run on Atlantic Theater Company's 199-seat main stage in Chelsea – completely reimagined its documentary film source material for the stage. **M**

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