

Putting the 'Theatre' in 'Movie Theatre'

More and more hit shows are taking the high-def stage-to-screen gamble

BY JONATHAN MANDELL

A camera team in London's Olivier Theatre prepares for the NT Live broadcast of *All's Well That Ends Well*.

SIMON ANNAND

TODRICK HALL GREW UP IN THE SMALL TOWN of Plainview, Tex., many miles from a legitimate theatre. But at age 10, he saw three live performances that changed his life: *Cats*, *Jekyll & Hyde* and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. And he's now convinced they led to his career as a Broadway performer. But they may also have had something to do with his appearance on television as a contestant on "American Idol," because the "live performances" he saw as a child were not on a stage—they were on his TV screen.

"It was the live aspect that interested me," Hall recalls. "I thought it was so cool how the scenery would move and nobody was moving it."

That's why, as a member of the ensemble in the hit Broadway musical *Memphis*, Hall was delighted to take part in what amounts to an experiment: *Memphis* is being presented from April 28 to May 3 on screens in more than 500 movie theatres across the United States. The movie was edited from five live performances, taped in January on the stage of Broadway's Shubert Theatre. "I was very supportive of it," Hall says. "Some people in the company were very 'anti'—they were of the old-school idea that musicals should remain on the stage."

Memphis joins two other Broadway shows—*Fela!* and Roundabout Theatre Company's current mounting of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, screening June 2–30—in continuing a trend pioneered by the Metropolitan Opera and the National Theatre of London over the past several years. At a time when movies like *Avatar* have revived the notion of 3-D cinema, actual three-dimensional stage shows are

starting to appear in two dimensions on movie screens.

Eleven days after *Fela!* closed at Broadway's Eugene O'Neill Theatre in January, National Theatre Live transmitted a live performance from the show's National Theatre staging to screens around the world, including the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a few subway stops from the Broadway house where the show had been playing for more than a year. Unlike *Fela!*, the screen versions of both *Memphis* and *Earnest* will not be transmitted live (or nearly live; in fact, *Fela!* was broadcast to some theatres on a slight delay).

There is another, more startling difference: Both shows will still be playing on Broadway at the same time that they are being shown on screens—making some wonder whether the pursuit of new strategies to reach audiences has turned self-defeating. "I'm being asked, 'Are you sure this isn't going to hurt you?' I'm not sure of anything," says Sue Frost, who with Randy Adams is the lead producer of *Memphis*. "We're gambling that people are going to see this movie and go, 'Oh, boy, I can't wait to see this live.'"

Indeed, when a company called Broadway Worldwide approached producers early in the musical's run, they hesitated at first.

"The two big reasons why people don't see Broadway shows are price and proximity; this solves both problems," argues Bruce Brandwen of Broadway Worldwide. Brandwen has been recording Broadway shows for three decades (including the *Jekyll & Hyde* DVD Todrick Hall saw at age 10). The *Memphis* producers were finally persuaded by an encouraging precedent.



LORI CARTER

Julie and Robert Borchard-Young of BY Experience.

“*Chicago* was about to close [on Broadway]—you could see it from the grosses,” Adams says. “When the movie came out, the grosses on Broadway went up.” But the movie *Chicago* is clearly a film adaptation, a somewhat different beast from this emerging trend, for which there is not yet an agreed-upon name: Some call it a transmission, or HD (high-definition) transmission; others a cine-cast; still others a live capture. A traditional term for it is filmed theatre, although theatrical productions are no longer being recorded using film.

“We’re not making movies, we’re making events,” says Julie Borchard-Young. Her husband, Robert Borchard-Young, chimes in, “It’s like a sporting event.” Together the Borchard-Youngs run the company BY Experience, which initiated the latest trend, working both with the Met and with National Theatre Live. The company is putting together a similar “event” for *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Whatever you call it, the trend has the attention of the theatre community.

“One of the questions many of us are asking is whether filmed theatre is an entirely different art form—from both theatre and from film,” says Susan Medak, longtime managing director of California’s Berkeley Repertory Theatre and president of the League of Resident Theatres. “We’re all curious about whether this is a way of building new audiences, or whether this will wind up replacing live experiences. I don’t think anyone has answered yet.”

“MORE THAN HALF OF MODERN culture depends on what one shouldn’t read,” Algren declares in front of a Victrola during

the first act of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. As he speaks, six long-snouted machines placed throughout the orchestra probe the Victorian-looking stage like visitors from the future; a seventh snakes its way over the heads of the audience from the boxed seats, as if charmed. These are the high-definition cameras recording one of three performances being captured of the Roundabout production of the Oscar Wilde classic.

Seats were cleared away in the middle of rows J through L to make room for one of the cameras, and a huge production truck sits outside the American Airlines Theatre on 43rd Street. There is a notice in the *Playbill* about the recording, but in fact there is little intrusion into the theatre-going experience. There are no special lights, sound equipment or makeup; the actors do nothing they wouldn’t do in a regular performance.

“We’re not in the film business,” says Harold Wolpert, the Roundabout’s managing director. “This is the *theatre* business. As a nonprofit, part of our mission is to make theatre more accessible.”

To make *Earnest* happen as a recording, the Roundabout partnered with L.A. Theatre

Works, which had gotten funding from the Sidney E. Frank Foundation (the cost is “under a million,” says Wolpert), negotiated for six months with seven unions, and hired BY Experience to do both production and distribution.

“The world around us has changed, with the growth of the Internet and the sharing of content on different platforms,” says Wolpert. “Do we ignore it, or do we find a way to help advance theatre? This is a new model.”

To many, this might seem like nothing really new. As early as 1900, Sarah Bernhardt’s stage performance as Hamlet was immortalized on film. So was Richard Burton’s 1964 Broadway turn in the same role, which was taped, transferred to film, and shown in some 1,000 movie theatres throughout the nation.

Film’s smaller-screen cousin, television, has also frequently turned its cameras to the stage: In 1948, a program called “Tonight on Broadway” began broadcasting live 30-minute excerpts directly from Broadway stages, offering TV viewers black-and-white glimpses of such shows as *Mister Roberts* with Henry Fonda and *The Heiress* with Wendy Hiller and

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Basil Rathbone. This was the precursor to such television series as “American Playhouse” and the long-running “Great Performances,” both on PBS.

This season on HBO alone, there have been so many broadcasts of solo stage shows (Carrie Fisher’s *Wishful Drinking*, Laurence Fishburne’s *Thurgood*, Colin Quinn’s *Long Story Short*, as well as the star vehicle *The Pee-wee Herman Show on Broadway*) that Howard Sherman, executive director of the American Theatre Wing, wonders whether Broadway has been turned into a tryout town for premium cable.

But television did not entirely supplant the movie house in the effort to capture the magic of the stage for the screen. In 1959–61, Ely Landau produced a “Play of the Week” TV series on New York’s Channel 13. A decade later, he tried a similar idea in movie houses, creating a season subscription series he called American Film Theatre. Between 1973 and 1975, Landau presented 14 films of stage plays in movie theatres; all are now available on DVD, as are a surprising number of recorded plays and musicals.

“Many people over the years have had



Santino Fontana, Charlotte Parry, Sara Topham and David Furr in the Roundabout Theatre Company’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

the notion of filming theatre and trying to make a profit of it,” says Patrick Hoffman, director of the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. “And many have failed. There’s a big graveyard of those projects.” For 41 years, TOFT, as it is called, has recorded more than 6,000 works

of theatre, many of them on Broadway, for one-time viewing by scholars and researchers. It is the oldest and largest of some half-dozen such archives around the world. The cost of recording each play or musical for the library, Hoffman says, can be as high as \$15,000.

By contrast, Bruce Brandwen estimates the cost of the *Memphis* recording at \$3–4 million. The big reason for the disparity is that payment to cast and creators is waived for the library’s archival recordings. Compensation has been the big obstacle in the past, which some producers privately frame as difficulty in negotiating with the unions. The unions see it differently.

“We like to think of ourselves as a cutting-edge industry, but the truth is that all of us in the theatre—producers, unions—have really been behind the times,” says Laura Penn, the executive director of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. Before taking her position at the union, she was managing director of Seattle’s Intiman Theatre for 14 years. The three major concerns of the unions, Penn says, have been compensation, artistic control and credit. But Penn says she detects a change in attitude on all sides.

“If I were running a nonprofit theatre right now, I would try to figure out with my artistic director how we would be participating in this moment of evolution. Something clearly is happening now.”

ATTITUDES ARE NOT ALL THAT HAVE changed. To Julie Borchard-Young of BY Experience, what is happening now that is “absolutely new” is the technology. In the past decade, movie theatres have been replacing (or supplementing) their standard

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CATHERINE ASHMORE

Jonny Lee Miller and Benedict Cumberbatch in the National Theatre's *Frankenstein*.

film projectors with digital projectors. There are now some 1,500 such projectors around the world, and these are what enable high-definition screenings—and state-of-the-art live presentations.

In 2003, Julie Borchard, then working as head of marketing for Sony in Europe, teamed up with Robert Young, a concert promoter, to transmit a David Bowie concert

live on screens throughout Europe. “He sold more albums and tickets afterwards than he had in decades,” she says. Together Borchard and Young—who soon became partners in marriage and in business—approached the Metropolitan Opera, whose general manager, Peter Gelb, had been Borchard’s old boss at Sony. Now finishing its fifth season, “The Met: Live in HD” series has presented 46 operas on screens throughout the U.S. and in 42 other countries.

Impressed by these transmissions, Nicholas Hytner, artistic director of the National Theatre in London, hired David Sabel to see “whether it could work for the theatre,” says Sabel. “Filmed live performance has such a bad track record.” They decided it was worth trying. “As a publicly funded institution, our mission is to reach as many audiences across the U.K. as possible.”

Enlisting BY Experience for distribution and attracting corporate sponsorship, the National’s live transmissions began during the summer of 2009 with a performance of *Phèdre* starring Helen Mirren. Since then a dozen productions have been shown in 380 venues in 20 countries. Surveying audiences

of National Live’s first two presentations, a company called the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) found that viewers expressed “even higher levels of emotional engagement with the production than audiences at the theatre. They also claim that they are now more likely to visit the theatre in the future.”

A recent audience on New York’s Upper East Side for the National’s transmission of Danny Boyle’s *Frankenstein* included theatre professionals such as Robert Dagny, who was first in line and had been to every National Live broadcast (“It’s cheaper than going to London,” he says) and first-timers such as Elizabeth Haddrell, a college literature instructor, who had assigned her class Mary Shelley’s novel. “I do go to live theatre as much as I can,” said Haddrell, “but that usually does not include Broadway.” It did not even occur to her to see *Memphis*. But would she go to the movie *Memphis*?

“For \$20, I might,” Haddrell says. ☒

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