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Broadway Braces for 'A Very Long Intermission'

Saturday, April 04, 2009

FOX NEWS

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By Randeew Dawn



Broadway called it "Bloody Sunday."

On Jan. 4, less than three months ago, 18 shows drew their curtains for the last time, including big name Tony winners "Hairspray," "Gypsy" and "Spamalot."

Producer Daryl Roth, who has produced six Pulitzer Prize-winning plays on Broadway over her 18-year career, compared the Great White Way's post-economic-collapse plight to the time when terrorist attacks brought down the Twin Towers.

"After 9/11, nobody was excited about going to the theater until everybody sort of recovered a bit, and got that passion to help everything in New York City," she told FOXnews.com.

Bernadette Peters as Rose in scene from musical "Gypsy" in 2003. Its revival, starring Patty LuPone, closed January 24, 2009.

"But that was a short-lived intermission. We're in a very long intermission right now. This is the biggest dip for the economy since I began producing on Broadway."

But was "Bloody Sunday" really a sign that Broadway was going the way of Lehman Brothers?

Maybe not, insiders say. For one thing, those Tony winners had been running for years and had more or less come to the end of their natural lives. "It was time to see them close," says Charlotte St. Martin, executive director of The Broadway League, a trade association.

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Of those 18 shows, 11 were also limited-run, shows that were destined to close on a specific date no matter how well they did. Finally, January and February are the months when Broadway shows traditionally close.

Looking at the big picture, Broadway is performing much better than it did after the stock-market crash of 1929, when the number of productions was cut in half

and cast sizes were slashed.

At least 43 productions are scheduled to open during the 2008-09 season (compared to 36 last season and 35 the season before that), and gross revenues are at \$713.7 million and climbing. Last season earned only \$682.8 million, a number that was on the low side thanks to a stagehand strike.

To keep audiences coming, producers are hyper-aware of finding the right hook. Pulitzer and Tony-winner "August: Osage County" is losing Estelle Parsons to the road production, so they've replaced her with the well-known Broadway draw Phylicia Rashad.

Roth praises the former "Cosby" mom for her talent, but admits, "A name value always helps. Producers are thinking very carefully about what star power will bring to their production. It always counts – but now it counts even more."

The real stress for Broadway doesn't come with this season's productions, because their investors ponied up cash pre-crash. The key is how next season will fare.

"There is a wait-and-see attitude about next season," admits St. Martin. "But there are no cookie-cutter answers for Broadway, because no one understands what makes up a success."

Bajorek, for example, has "put the brakes" on her musical "Pride & Prejudice" and now plans to open it in April 2010, if all goes well. But Christopher Presley, director of professional development at the Actor's Studio Drama School – who has three projects in early stages (including a "Best Little Whorehouse in Texas" revival and a glam-rock opera of "Caligula") – says he's not worried about attracting investors.

"You go into an investment in the theater knowing it's highly risky," he says. "People do want to make their money back, but people also invest for the glamour of it and to be a part of it. It's about so much more than finances."

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Insiders point to "Wicked" as a bellwether. It still routinely pulls in 100 percent capacity, after six years on Broadway. "I say you should only worry if 'Wicked' starts selling 50-percent-off tickets," says Bajorek.

Actress Faith Prince, who just joined the Broadway cast of "The Little Mermaid" after touring the country with Sweeney Todd, brings a valuable outsider's perspective. She says the theaters outside of New York City are packed with people who want good entertainment.

"Audiences keep coming because they want to be soothed," she says. "We're going to make it, that's how I feel about us – and about Broadway, too."

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