When the Show Doesn’t Go On: Broadway Is Rattled by Covid Cancellations

Broadway, where cancellations were once vanishingly rare, has seen a raft of them as positive coronavirus tests among cast and crew members have upended productions.

By Michael Paulson

Dec. 15, 2021

Theater actors have long prided themselves on performing despite infections and injuries — singing through strain and dancing through pain. No more.

The coronavirus pandemic has upended the theater industry’s longstanding “show must go on” philosophy, supplanting it with a safety-first strategy. The result: a raft of cancellations unlike any in history.

On Wednesday, “Tina,” a jukebox musical about Tina Turner, canceled both of its performances; “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child,” a stage sequel to the novels, canceled its matinee, and “Hamilton” canceled its evening performance. A new musical adaptation of “Mrs. Doubtfire” had already canceled four performances between Sunday and Wednesday, while Lin-Manuel Miranda’s improv troupe, “Freestyle Love Supreme,” canceled three, and “Ain’t Too Proud,” the Temptations jukebox musical, canceled one. At an Off Broadway theater down the street, a strong-selling revival of “Little Shop of Horrors” scrapped four shows last weekend.

All cited Covid.

In each case, at least one member of the show’s cast or crew tested positive for the coronavirus, and, either because of a lack of enough people to replace those who test positive or a concern about contagion, performances had to be canceled. They were not the first, and almost certainly won’t be the last, as the persistent pandemic continues to pose a challenge to an industry struggling to get back on its feet after a lengthy and damaging shutdown kept theaters dark for more than a year.

Broadway has taken precautions — there is an industrywide vaccine mandate for audiences and workers, and patrons must wear masks — but nobody lives in a bubble, and frequent testing (daily at some shows) is turning up a steady stream of breakthrough infections. And as the Omicron variant causes caseloads to rise, some performing arts institutions are starting to go further: The Metropolitan Opera said Wednesday that, starting Jan. 17, it would require booster shots for both employees and audience members.

In many cases, those testing positive have been asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic, but they are not allowed to return until they are deemed no longer contagious.

“We have to accept that there is going to be some percentage of performances lost to this,” said Hunter Arnold, a producer whose shows this season included a new comedy, “Chicken & Biscuits,” that had to close for 10 days last month because of coronavirus cases in its company.

The cancellations are not only disruptive to consumers — some of them have been announced just minutes before showtime — but are also costly to producers, who already struggle to achieve profitability in an industry where far more shows fail than succeed. For a show grossing $1 million a week, each missed performance would mean a loss of about $125,000; cancellations on weekends are costlier, because that’s when many shows are most full, and cancellations at this time of year are especially painful, because Broadway traditionally sees an attendance spike during the holiday season.
At "Mrs. Doubtfire," for example, the Covid cancellations ate up all of last week's anticipated profits — about $300,000 — according to Kevin McCollum, the show's lead producer. But he said he is optimistic that many of those whose tickets were canceled will rebook for a later performance. "What's happening is a challenge for all of us in the industry, because we're in the business of gathering," Mr. McCollum said. "We can't pretend no one has Covid when they have Covid. I'm hoping this will be put into the level of the common cold in the future, but until then, we have to respect it fully."

"Chicken & Biscuits," which was already struggling at the box office when infections hit its company, cited the costs of canceled shows in deciding to close down the production for good.

The industry's leaders say cancellations show their commitment to safety, but are nonetheless worrisome. "What's going on was contemplated — we hoped that it wouldn't happen in the numbers that it's happening, but it was contemplated, because we know there's an ongoing pandemic," said Mary McColl, the executive director of Actors' Equity, a labor union representing performers and stage managers. "The fact that cases are being caught, and performances are being paused, shows that both sides are paying attention — the producers and the unions — and that's what all of the safety protocols are there for. And my hope is that makes audiences feel more secure."

The Broadway League, a trade organization representing producers and theater owners, agreed that the cancellations are not a surprise, but also noted that most shows are continuing to run. As of Sunday, there had been 2,351 Broadway performances, seen by 2.3 million people, since plays and musicals returned in late summer.
“There’s no question that this current rash of breakthrough cases is concerning, but the industry has not shut down,” said Charlotte St. Martin, the League’s president. “I’m knocking on wood so much I have bruised knuckles, but so far we’re still open, and a two- or three-day shutdown, now and then, I think is to be expected.”

Fans have been upset, frustrated, rattled, but also understanding.

“I’m not insane — of course they’re going to cancel a show if someone has Covid,” said Karleigh Kebartas, a 21-year-old psychology student at Pace University, who had a ticket to the canceled Saturday matinee of “Little Shop,” “but it’s disappointing.” Ms. Kebartas was already at the theater when the show was canceled — in fact, much of the audience was held in the lobby until several minutes after the scheduled start time, when an announcement was made with no explanation of the reason. But Ms. Kebartas got lucky — on Tuesday, she was able to buy another ticket to that night’s performance, enabling her to catch the show’s star, Jeremy Jordan, before heading home to Massachusetts for the holidays.

The closings began almost as soon as Broadway reopened. On Sept. 28, the Disney musical "Aladdin" resumed performances at the New Amsterdam Theater; the next day, the show canceled a performance, citing breakthrough cases, and then, after another performance, it detected more cases and took a 12-day pause.

Since that time, there have been a handful of closings at other shows — the lengthy shutdown at “Chicken & Biscuits,” and shorter Covid-related shutdowns at “Chicago,” which went dark for a five-day stretch last month, and “Wicked,” which lost a weekend early this month. And it’s not just theater: The acclaimed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater canceled its performances Wednesday and Thursday, citing positive coronavirus tests.

Plus there have been additional cancellations of “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child” and “American Utopia” that the producers said were not Covid-related.

“The closings began almost as soon as Broadway reopened. On Sept. 28, the Disney musical "Aladdin" resumed performances at the New Amsterdam Theater; the next day, the show canceled a performance, citing breakthrough cases, and then, after another performance, it detected more cases and took a 12-day pause.

Since that time, there have been a handful of closings at other shows — the lengthy shutdown at “Chicken & Biscuits,” and shorter Covid-related shutdowns at “Chicago,” which went dark for a five-day stretch last month, and “Wicked,” which lost a weekend early this month. And it’s not just theater: The acclaimed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater canceled its performances Wednesday and Thursday, citing positive coronavirus tests.

Plus there have been additional cancellations of “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child” and “American Utopia” that the producers said were not Covid-related.

“Canceling random performances can only hurt — it just puts the whole confidence that a performance will happen up in the air,” said Ted Chapin, a longtime industry leader and the former president of the Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization. “It would be nice if Covid could calm down, but it does seem as if during this time when people are not being as diligent as they should be, we may be in this longer than we would like.”

But thus far, patrons still seem to be flocking to shows. The cancellations are still “a small number of performances relative to the whole,” said Victoria Bailey, executive director of the nonprofit Theater Development Fund, which runs the TKTS booth in Times Square. “We’re hyper-aware of it because within the industry we all have this underlying anxiety: ‘We need this to last. We need this to last. We need this to last. We need this to keep going.’ But the average consumer: not so much.”

Understudies are helping some shows keep going. But in some instances, particularly for new shows, there are not enough replacements ready to go on.

“It may be that certain shows have to think about how much coverage they have, and economically whether we can afford to expand coverage,” said Tom Kirdahy, a lead producer of “Little Shop.” “It can’t be that if one person tests positive, an entire production shuts down — that model is unsustainable.”

One unresolved question: compensation. Thus far, most shows have paid company members even when performances have been canceled, but it is not clear whether that practice will continue.

The cancellations are happening elsewhere as well. Canceled performances are now widespread in London, where theaters have had less stringent safety rules. In Paris, a performance of the ballet "Don Quixote" was canceled this week at the Opéra Bastille because of positive cases in its company. And in Washington on Wednesday, the Kennedy Center announced that it was delaying the start of a touring production of “ Ain't Too Proud” for 13 days, citing breakthrough cases.
Melissa Castor, a 31-year-old graphic designer, was still at home on Long Island on Saturday when she saw on Twitter that the performance of “Freestyle Love Supreme” she was planning to attend that night had been canceled. “I was upset, but it’s not like I had to buy a plane ticket or get a hotel, and I know going in that a show could be canceled,” she said. “This is the age we live in.”

The reversal of fortune was particularly abrupt for Ben Ratner, a 29-year-old digital producer, who on Sunday morning scored a rush ticket to that day’s “Mrs. Doubtfire” matinee, but 90 minutes later got an email saying the performance was canceled. “I was a little annoyed, but also understanding,” he said. “I will never blame a production for doing the right thing for safety.”