Private Data Shows Broadway’s Hits and Misses After Reopening

Big shows did well when they returned in the fall after the long pandemic shutdown but new plays struggled, previously undisclosed industry data shows.

By Michael Paulson

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During the long dark months when the coronavirus pandemic kept Broadway shuttered, a hypothesis took hold in parts of the industry: Once theaters reopened, the audience would include more New Yorkers and fewer tourists, and the result could be a more receptive marketplace for ambitious new plays.

It did not turn out that way.

Previously undisclosed data about the financial performance of individual Broadway shows reveal that the fundamental modern economics of the industry, in which big brands dominate and adventurous new works struggle to break through, were reinforced, rather than upended, as the industry reopened last fall.

The good news: In the months between the reopening of Broadway and the upheaval caused by the arrival of Omicron, the biggest prepandemic hits were doing reasonably well. The disappointment: Many new and unfamiliar plays, including a much-heralded work of by Black writers and a pair of experimental plays by white writers, struggled to sell tickets, much as plays have often done in recent seasons.

The information about the shows’ financial performance was collected by the Broadway League, a trade association representing producers and theater owners, and distributed to the association’s membership in mid-January. The League, in a break with past practice, has decided not to make show-by-show box office data public this season, saying the circumstances are so unusual that the data cannot fairly be compared to that of other seasons, but The New York Times has obtained access to the numbers.

The data, which begins in mid-September, when some of the biggest musicals reopened, runs only through Dec. 12, just before a spike in positive coronavirus tests among theater workers forced as many as half of all Broadway shows to cancel performances. In the weeks since, Broadway has taken a tumble — even though the wave of cancellations has stopped, attendance has been soft and multiple shows have closed.

But before the Omicron variant, Broadway’s box office was doing far better than pessimists had feared, given the dearth of visitors and office workers, ongoing concerns about public health, and uncertainty about the effect of vaccine mandates and mask requirements. During the final week covered in the data — the week that ended Dec. 12 — about one-third of the shows running grossed more than $1 million, which has often been seen as a sign of strength. Among them: the musicals “Hamilton,” “Wicked,” “The Lion King,” “Moulin Rouge!,” “Tina,” “Six,” “Aladdin,” “The Book of Mormon,” “Hadestown” and “The Phantom of the Opera,” and the plays “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child,” “To Kill a Mockingbird” and “The Lehman Trilogy.”

Notably, the club of top grossers included two newcomers, “Six” and “The Lehman Trilogy,” both of which were well-reviewed, small-cast shows that were in previews in 2020 when the pandemic hit, and then finally opened last October. “Six” is still running on Broadway; “The Lehman Trilogy” ended its Broadway run as scheduled on Jan. 2 and on March 3 it plans to begin a monthlong run in Los Angeles.

Also noteworthy: “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child,” which during the pandemic shutdown was trimmed from a two-part play to a more traditional one-part show, appears, at least initially, to have benefited from the reconstructive surgery. The shorter version impressed critics and reduced running costs, and its weekly grosses in early December were about $1.7 million, which is significantly better than it was doing during that same period in 2019.

During the industry’s best fall stretch — Thanksgiving week — “Hamilton” grossed over $3 million, and “The Lion King,” “Wicked” and “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child” each grossed over $2 million.

The effect of the Tony Awards, which were held Sept. 26 in an effort to showcase the reopening of Broadway, is difficult to discern. “Moulin Rouge!,” which won the best musical Tony, sold well through the fall, but less well than it had in the fall of 2019 (the week before Thanksgiving last year, the musical grossed $1.5 million; during that same week in 2019, it had grossed $2 million).
The fall was especially tough for plays, which often struggle in an era when Broadway is dominated by big musicals. Critically acclaimed plays like “Pass Over,” “Is This a Room” and “Dana H.” played to houses that were at times between one half and two-thirds empty.

The average ticket prices for all the new plays other than “The Lehman Trilogy” were well below the industry average, suggesting that the plays were resorting to steep discounts. During Thanksgiving week, the average ticket price at “Hamilton” was $297, while at “Chicken & Biscuits” it was $35.

Other than “Lehman,” the strongest selling of the new plays was “Thoughts of a Colored Man,” which grossed over $400,000 in some weeks. It has since closed, as has every other play that was running on Broadway last fall other than “Cursed Child.”

There were also, as there always are, musicals that struggled too. The new musical “Diana,” which opened to harsh reviews and closed a month later, played to 51 percent capacity houses and grossed $374,000 (for seven performances) during the week that ended Dec. 12. “Girl From the North Country,” which has closed but says it plans to reopen in the spring, played to 47 percent capacity audiences that week and grossed $310,000, and “Flying Over Sunset,” which ended its run early, played to 69 percent capacity audiences and grossed $323,000 that week.

“Jagged Little Pill,” the musical featuring songs by Alanis Morissette, did better than those shows, but not well enough to sustain a long run. The show was playing to houses that were about four-fifths full in the late fall, and it grossed $768,000 the week of Dec. 12. It closed a week later.

Broadway is now in the midst of a particularly grim winter, and there are currently only 19 shows in the 41 theaters, which is lower than it has been for years. But producers say their daily wraps (that’s their net ticket sales) are picking up and they are optimistic about spring; there are already 14 openings scheduled in April.