Fauci Says It Could Be a Year Before Theater Without Masks Feels Normal

Dr. Anthony Fauci said a vaccine would need to exist for nearly a year before people might feel comfortable returning to theaters unmasked, which he said would likely be mid- to late 2021.

By Sarah Bahr
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As theaters look to see how they might reopen with safety accommodations including mask use, Dr. Anthony Fauci says it will likely be more than a year before people feel comfortable returning to theaters without masks.

“If we get a really good vaccine and just about everybody gets vaccinated,” he said in an Instagram Live interview with Jennifer Garner on Wednesday, “you’ll have a degree of immunity in the general community that I think you can walk into a theater without a mask and feel like it’s comfortable that you’re not going to be at risk.”

He said that would likely not be until mid- to late 2021.

But that doesn’t mean he is saying when it would be safe to go to the theater without a mask. Dr. Fauci, the country’s leading infectious disease expert, clarified in a phone interview on Friday that he was referring to when people could return to theater-going at their pre-coronavirus comfort levels. “Words like ‘safe’ are charged,” he said. “I’m talking about the general trend of when we’ll start to feel comfortable going back to normal if we get a safe and effective vaccine.”

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- Fauci cautions the virus could disrupt life in the U.S. until ‘maybe even towards the end of 2021.’
Dr. Fauci said that although a vaccine might be available as early as the end of this year or the beginning of 2021, it would likely be well into next year before enough people were vaccinated to ensure broad protection.

But Dr. Fauci said that in green-zone areas — those with very low community transmission — indoor theaters may be able to return sooner if people wear masks. “As long as there is infection in the community, you do not want indoor spaces with crowds,” he said Friday. “But in states, cities or counties in the green zone with low levels of infection, I imagine theaters could maybe open at 25 percent capacity, with people wearing masks, sometime as early as next year.”

Experts said Dr. Fauci’s comments help set the expectation that the coronavirus will be around for some time. “We should not be thinking of the vaccine as a silver bullet,” Dr. Leana Wen, an emergency physician and public health professor at George Washington University who previously served as Baltimore’s health commissioner, said Friday. “It will take months to vaccinate hundreds of millions of people, and the vaccine may be, at best, 75 percent effective.”

Dr. Peter Hotez, the dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, said the first vaccines “are not magic solutions.”

“So we’ll likely still need to continue masks and contact tracing,” he said.

The Broadway League said in a statement on Friday that it would continue to put the health of employees and audiences first as it works to help theaters reopen. “We are working closely with medical experts and members of Governor Cuomo’s recovery team to ensure that all proper health and safety protocols will be in place when the time comes to reopen our theaters,” it said.

Producers have said they will refund all tickets purchased for performances through Jan. 3. Some Broadway theaters are hoping to reopen as soon as March — the earliest planned
opening night right now is for the Tracy Letts play “The Minutes,” which is currently set for March 15.

Two more shows, a revival of David Mamet’s play “American Buffalo” and a new show about Michael Jackson, “MJ the Musical,” aim to follow nearly a month later on April 14 and 15. The much-anticipated revival of “The Music Man,” headlined by Hugh Jackman and Sutton Foster, which was originally set for the fall, now plans to open May 20.