

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

B'way in Limbo Until 2021??

David Sheward · Wednesday, April 22nd, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic is far from over and its effect on the theater world will be felt for months and possibly years. Though parts of the country have begun making moves to “reopen” their economies and ease restrictions—you get a haircut in Georgia starting this weekend—large public gatherings such as concerts, sporting events, and live theater, will likely be the last elements to return to normal. All Broadway theaters are closed until at least June 7. But in a recent interview with *Deadline*, Broadway League president Charlotte St. Martin averred that the date was never a definite marker for reopening. “We just said we were exchanging and refunding tickets up to June 7,” she clarified. There is no certain date for reopening Broadway and St. Martin went on to say that September or later was a more realistic goal. First, it would be necessary to get permission from NY Governor Andrew Cuomo, then at least additional six weeks would be needed to prepare. Meanwhile, the mayor of Los Angeles and the governor of Ohio have stated there will probably not be live entertainment in their respective jurisdictions until at least 2021.

The renewal of Broadway and other performing venues depends on testing and vaccines. Without preventive treatment for the highly contagious coronavirus, public events with more than 10 people would be dangerous. Even as the number of infections and hospital admissions decreases, there is still a risk there could be a resurgence of cases and deaths.

A vaccine is several months and possibly years away, so under what scenario would going to the theater with thousands of potential carriers be considered safe? Distance seating, temperature checks at the entrances, mandatory wearing of masks and gloves, issuing of badges with negative-virus status? And what about the actors? How would they be able to kiss, hug, fight, kick in a chorus line?



Laila Robbins, Maryann Plunkett, and Jay O. Sanders in *That Hopey Changey Thing*, one of Richard Nelson’s Apple Family Plays.

Credit: Carol Rosegg

A handful of Broadway productions have announced their closings or postponements, but now Off-Broadway has felt the lockdown’s effects into the summer. The Public Theater has announced the cancellation of its annual summer Shakespeare season at the Delacorte including *Richard II* and a musical version of *As You Like It* and all programming at the Public Theater through Aug. 31. This will be the first time since 1962 NYC has not enjoyed free theater in Central Park. The Public joins a growing number of companies offering streamed stagings with a new Apple family play by Richard Nelson. *What Do We Need to Talk About?*—will premiere on the Public Theater’s YouTube

channel on April 29 at 7:30 pm EST. The fictional Apple family from upstate New York who have been featured in four previous Nelson plays, will be sheltering in different locations and meeting on Zoom. The previous Apple plays—*That Hopey Changey Thing*, *Sweet and Sad*, *Sorry*, and *Regular Singing*—each take place on an actual night of political significance. This quartet and Nelson's subsequent set of three plays about the Gabriels, another family in the same town, are available for viewing on [Channel 13's website](#) through May 5.



Lucy Peacock and Andre Sillis in *Coriolanus* from the Stratford Festival.
Credit: David Hou

The British and Canadians are way ahead of Americans in terms of streaming theater online for free. The Stratford Festival of Ontario will begin offering videotaped editions of their previous productions starting April 23 on the company's YouTube channel. Each play will be available for three weeks. First up is *King Lear* starring Colm Feore, followed by *Coriolanus* (April 30-May 21), one of the best Shakespearean renditions I have ever seen. Next is *Macbeth* (May 7-28), *The Tempest* (May 14-June 4), *Timon of Athens* (May 21-June 11), *Love's Labour's Lost* (May 28-June 18), *Hamlet* (June 4-25), *King John* (June 11-July 2), *Pericles* (June 18-July 9), *Antony and Cleopatra* (June 25-July 16), *Romeo and Juliet* (July 2-23), and *The Taming of the Shrew* (July 9-30).

Speaking of the Bard, Shakespeare's Globe uploads a new show on YouTube every two weeks. The current feature is *Romeo and Juliet*. Also on YouTube, NT Live has its adaptation of *Treasure Island*, followed by a modern take on *Twelfth Night*. If you prefer contemporary fare, on its website, the [Hampstead Theater](#) offers *Tiger Country* (April 20-26), written and directed by Nina Raine, focusing on a team of doctors in a London hospital, and *#AIWW: The Arrest of Ai Wei Wei* (April 27-May 3), Howard Brenton's play about the real-life Chinese artist's ordeal with his government.

On an optimistic note, casting was announced for ART's upcoming non-traditional, gender-inclusive revival of *1776* which is still committed to playing ART's Boston home stage during its 2020-21 season and on Broadway in a Roundabout Theater in the spring of 2021. Directed by Tony winner Diane Paulus (*Pippin*), the cast is led by Crystal Lucas-Perry as John Adams, Tony nominee Elizabeth A. Davis (*Once*) as Thomas Jefferson, and Patrena Murray as Benjamin Franklin. The company has been workshopping on Zoom.



Conrad Rocamora and Alyse Alan Louise in *Soft Power*, nominated for 11 Drama Desk Awards.
Credit: Joan Marcus

Amidst the quarantines and lockdowns, the New York stage community is still celebrating live theater. To that end, some of the annual theater awards are proceeding digitally and considering productions from the season which ended abruptly on March 12 when the theaters closed. The most famous awards of them all, the Tonys for Broadway only, have been postponed indefinitely, but the Drama Desks, Lortels, and New York Drama Critics Circle Awards will be presented online. (If the Broadway theaters don't reopen until 2021, we may not see the Tonys again until 2022.) The Lucille Lortel Awards are for Off-Broadway only and will be presented on May 3. *A Strange Loop*, Michael R. Jackson's autobiographical musical about a young gay African-American man writing an autobiographical musical, has the most nominations with seven. The members of the New York Drama Critics Circle (myself included) met on Zoom on April 15 and

voted Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* as Best Play and *A Strange Loop* as Best Musical. Both shows played Off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons. The Drama Desk nominations, which include on, Off and Off-Off-Broadway, were announced on April 21 on [Stars in the House](#), a twice-daily web-based talk and variety show to benefit the Actors' Fund, by hosts Seth Rudetsky of Sirius/XM Satellite Radio and his husband, producer James Wesley. The awards will be presented online on May 31. *Soft Power*, a satirical Off-Broadway musical by David Henry Hwang and Jeanine Tesori presented by the Public Theater, received the most nominations with 11. After reading the nominations, Wesley teared up slightly, explaining, "It felt like the times we've heard the nominations before and things were normal. I found myself emotional reading them because it felt normal." It may be a long time before anything is "normal" in the theater world or in the larger world again.

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