

“Does Anybody Have A Map?”: The Impact of “Virtual Broadway” on Musical Theater Composition

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IN THEIR 2015 TEDx TALK, MUSICAL THEATER WRITERS BENJAMIN Pasek and Justin Paul identify a growing online culture within musical theater, terming this space “Virtual Broadway.” This term refers to the virtual arena within which musical theater composers and audiences directly interact, necessitating explorations of how this democratization of the mediation process has impacted musical theater composition and consumption. In popular culture, “There are no longer subjective gatekeepers controlling who gets let ‘in,’ promoted and exposed. The choice is ours. Now, anyone can be famous” (Price). This transformation is evident in musical theater, where an upsurge in “YouTube musical theater composers” (Pasek and Paul) and social media engagement challenges the dominance of the book musical. Opportunities for self-promotion on the Internet are vast and allow composers to reach a more diverse audience. These emerging opportunities subsequently influence the form of produced works. With humans online having an average attention span of eight seconds (Microsoft Canada 6), this article considers how musical theater is evolving to meet the requirements of millennials and Gen Z.

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The popularity of *Dear Evan Hansen*—arguably the first truly “digital age” musical (Takiff)—and *Be More Chill* provides timely examples of the impact of Virtual Broadway on the musical theater model. It is now both possible and timely to debate the extent to which this hybrid has “democratized access to creation and distribution tools” (Bhargava and Klat 5), allowing new voices and models to break through. Conversely, this may have also limited musical theater’s scope. As networks of influence diversify and democratize and the number of people engaging with Virtual Broadway rises, this article explores the next steps for musical theater as it discovers the Internet.

We now inhabit a “post-Internet” (Olsen) world where digital natives (and, increasingly, those born before the digital onslaught) exist in a state of constant connectivity, hooked up to a web of virtual platforms and social media services. Nicola Shaunessy has argued that digital natives may perceive the world differently as a result of growing up in this digital environment (qtd. in Hillman-McCord 4). They are the “fast audience” of Elizabeth Diller and Richard Scofidio able to “follow many strands of information delivered through a variety of means” (qtd. in Papagiannouli 429), who “are increasingly finding the world not a book to be read but a performance to participate in” (Schechner 25). In this technological cosmos, image and identity are carefully constructed through a plethora of cleverly selected filters, characters, and memes, resulting in a situation where “one can never be sure if you are performing or not” (Herndon qtd. in Waugh 237). As Nathan Jurgenson has noted, our increasingly intimate engagement with technology (for most people their smartphone is the last thing they touch at night and the first thing they reach for in the morning) alters both our “physical and emotive states” (Herndon qtd. in Waugh 249) and the entertainment that we create and consume. As with all things there has been a blurring of the binaries of “digital and analogue, virtual and physical, cybernetic and organic” (Cornell), and increasingly symbiotic relationships have emerged. Here, as Karen Archey and Robin Peckham observe, there is no “before” or “after”¹ but rather “an Internet state of mind” (8). This mind-set is shifting the power dynamics between producers and consumers, creators, and audiences, and causing a decentralization and digitization of musical theater, which is impacting form and structure.

Caroline Heim notes that “in the communal space called a theater auditorium [people] come together to play a role—that of [the]

audience” (2). Musical theater is a heightened medium “single-mindedly devoted to producing pleasure, inspiring spectators to tap their feet and sing along, or otherwise be carried away” (Savran 216); therefore, audience engagement is intensified—they have a “larger repertoire of actions to perform than audiences at plays” (Heim 80)—not only in the toe-tapping applause inducing elements, but also in the rabid merchandising that surrounds the performance. Musical theater merchandising is not a new phenomenon, as savvy commercial producers have long been conscious of the fact that musical theater audiences want to advertise their fandom and allegiance.² Indeed, as Maurya Wickstrom discusses, the stage version of *The Lion King* is staged in such a way as to make it appear that the “commodities in the store come to life and parade into the theatre” (293). This procession blurs the binary between audience and performer and connects the performance with the act of purchasing merchandise—a key part of the musical theater audience’s role.

Having seen the show and “bought the t-shirt,” musical theater audiences become part of a community with a shared “horizon of expectations.” This, to borrow from Stacy Wolf’s analysis of the *Wicked* fandom, spills outside of the frame of the theater and the ephemeral live performance into the digital sphere (220). Physically attending a musical is now “only a fraction of the experience a fan may have with a musical” (Hillman-McCord 2-3), and, in what Laura MacDonald suggests is an “extension of a musical’s brand” (18), audience members share selfies, create fan performances, make fan art, and write fan fiction. Through social media, they publicize their experience of, and connection to, the musical, cashing in on a show’s cultural currency and connecting with other consumers online. This is part of their virtual performance and identity creation, contradicting those who warned that the digital world would be the demise of live performance. Instead, as Patrick Lonergan observes: “Social media is not just a performance space; it is also a theatrical space” (16) where human bodies make digital technologies perform (Chun). In this online arena, fandom is cool—“Fans *perform* their fandom” (Hillman-McCord 134)—and a community whose participants can be “alone together” is created (Turkle).

Originating in the United Kingdom, but globally reaching, the Facebook group The Musical Theatre Appreciation Society (MTAS) is a significant example of an online musical theater community

contributing to the sphere of Virtual Broadway. With over 46,000 members, the group spills across social media platforms and real life (with meetups and events) in a highly active forum where members discuss the finer details of musical theater shows and productions with passion and often fierce debate. Recent postings include discussions surrounding appropriate audience etiquette in theaters (with over three hundred comments in one day) and intense speculation regarding the possible casting choices for an upcoming production. Such a culture of heightened fandom has led to the creation of the “participatory spectator” (Jensen 4), what Alvin Toffler refers to—in a portmanteau of consumer and producer—as a “prosumer” (11), a role that some theaters have capitalized on by creating “tweet seats” to “encourage live tweeting during performances as a way to constructively shape audiences’ need to be attentive to their cell phones into activities that help recreate a sense of community” (Edney 108) while providing free promotion for the production. More recently, following the success of *Six* (2017), audiences are encouraged to film (and share) an encore performance. Abigail de Kosnick has argued that this fan labor should be acknowledged and valued “as a new form of publicity and advertising, authored by volunteers that corporations badly need in an era of market fragmentation” (172)—an interesting consideration in the zero-hour contract neoliberal economy that we currently inhabit.

Savvy musical theater producers have switched on to the potential of the musical’s virtual presence. *Dear Evan Hansen*’s producer Stacey Mindich invited her “board of digital advisors” to an “Influencer Night” during the musical’s previews in order to devise a digital strategy that would ensure the Broadway-bound show created a virtual wave (Seymour). As Broadway producer Kevin McCollum states, “Technology is the tool, not the destination, the destination is a live audience” (qtd. in Hillman-McCord 139), and we increasingly see creative approaches to engage and link the “virtual” and the “live.” In an innovative gesture, the original production of *Next to Normal* staged a simultaneous Twitter performance, adding to the immersive feel of the show by creating a parallel cyber-reality that was so effective an audience member approached an actor in the show to ask whether he tweeted from the wings (Newman). This Twitter performance, though conceived as a marketing ploy, further challenged traditional audience/protagonist relations, adding the sphere of cyber-

reality to the features of the onstage world. Online message boards discuss how the Twitter performance enhanced and altered perceptions of character and the familial relationships within the show. In a fan discussion on Broadwayworld.com, one contributor describes how their reading of the show, and Gabe's place within it, has altered in light of the Twitter performance. The discussion then explores how songs within the show now have a deeper meaning. This multidimensional concept lends itself to analysis in a post-"author-god" (Barthes 52) environment, where multiple meanings, readings, and retweets are permissible. As MacDonald has observed, the Twitter performance created a "digital musical theater hypertext" (29). This was further developed when the show's writers, Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey, invited followers to tweet suggestions for a new song for the show. The show's viral audience was then invited to collaborate on lyrics, democratizing the creative process. This social media engagement was truly transformative, expanding the show's remit—at its high point tracking site Twitterholic showed N2NBroadway engaging more followers than Starbucks and Paris Hilton (Newman)—empowering the show's cyber following and exploring musical theater's potential in the age of social media.

Hamilton: An American Musical and *Dear Evan Hansen* have further explored this potential to fully engage the participatory spectator. Self-defined "Hamifans," "Hamiltrash," or "Faniltors" (Hillman-McCord 120) have been cybernetically involved in *Hamilton* through the musical's use of social media platforms and the creation of #Ham4Ham and, more recently, Hamildrop. #Ham4Ham comprises short performances ranging between two and eleven minutes in length that were initially conceived to entertain crowds waiting to discover the outcome of the show's weekly lottery (indeed, the hashtag relates to the fact that these spectators were hoping to spend \$10—the bill that features a portrait of Alexander Hamilton—to see *Hamilton*). These performances, which audiences were encouraged to share across web platforms, were notably varied in content. Some featured songs cut from the show, others gender-swapped numbers from the show, and there are numerous cameos from other Broadway stars happy to be associated with the hit show.³ The breadth of their reach was extensive. Against a backdrop of debate about escalating ticket prices and limited ticket availability, real and virtual audiences were able to enjoy innovative and accessible performances. Just as *Next to*

Normal's serialized twitter performance provided greater context and the opportunity for fresh perspectives, so too did the #Ham4Ham shows.

Metatextual references engaging concepts of postmodernity and self-reflexivity are integral to the digital hypertext of these contemporary musicals. *Hamilton* in particular cashes in on its audience's horizon of expectations and understanding of the genre of musical theater. References to Rodgers and Hammerstein⁴—considered by some to be the creators of musical theater as we know it today—carry particular weight and resonance as their shows are so well known and closely associated with the musical's supposed “Golden Age.”⁵ A memorable #Ham4Ham video sees the younger members of the cast of *Fun Home* join *Hamilton* stars Anthony Ramos (Philip Hamilton), Lin Manuel Miranda (Alexander Hamilton), and Phillipa Soo (Eliza Hamilton) to tell the stories of the Hamilton children who are not included in the musical. Eliza and Alexander Hamilton had eight children (their eldest, Philip, is the only one featured in the musical), and this #Ham4Ham extends “Phillip’s Rap” from *Hamilton*, allowing each child to share their story. The youngest child, Phillip—“the second try” (Sherman)—does not rap like his siblings but instead sings alternate lyrics to the tune of “So Long, Farewell” from *The Sound of Music*. One can hear in the recording an instant response from the audience, who recognize this well-known musical theater standard. As this is a farewell song, it is employed here to end the #Ham4Ham, adding a note of poignancy as the audience reflect on the lives of the Hamilton children and their legacy. *The Sound of Music* is heavily associated with the concept of family, so the explicit link between the Hamiltons and the Von Trapps is clear—one comment on the YouTube video declares that “It’s the family Von Hamilton.”

Dear Evan Hansen, unusually for a musical, is incredibly current. Set in the present day, the musical explores social media engagement and the capacity for content to go “viral.” This show has fully engaged the concept of the participatory spectator, even going so far as to have fans appear within the show as part of the social media streams that fill the stage.⁶ During the closing number of act 1, as Evan emotively sings “You Will Be Found” (Levenson et al. 89), the screens around the stage fill with images of people holding signs that declare #YouWillBeFound. These are not stock images or pictures of

actors, though—they are fans of the production (some of whom have never seen the show but have instead engaged with it across web platforms). Participatory spectatorship had become a hallmark of *Dear Evan Hansen*'s brand as it continued to engage with fans in online spaces in preparation for the show's London debut in winter 2019. Further echoing the emotive song "You Will Be Found," producers suggested to fans in marketing emails that they "Could Be Found" on the poster for the show. *Dear Evan Hansen* was advertised across London, asking fans to submit photos of themselves to truly become a part of the show. Building on Hillman-McCord's proposal that attending a musical is "a fraction of the experience a fan may have with the musical" (3), these fans are now appearing virtually in their favorite musical. These cybernetic performances not only increase audience engagement but expand the musical's central themes of visibility, presence, and belonging outside of the show's narrative to embrace the musical's postmodern presence.

"What's Inside?"

This online culture, where audiences actively perform their fandom and proactively consume and create content, has led to developments in the ways musical theater is composed—and thus, performed. A central development here is how musical theater is increasingly engaging the musical language of popular music, which tends to dominate the virtual environment, to engage with and attract changing demographics and new audiences. The form, structure, function, and ideology of theatrical songs are culturally relative and genre specific, and here a new subgenre can be identified: contemporary musical theater (CMT). CMT contains a unique set of musical tropes and trends that are shifting and developing in response to broader musical trends within popular culture and popular music specifically. As Kevin Michael Jones argues, CMT is a difficult term to define. However, there is an increasingly recognizable and distinctive musical aesthetic to songs often considered to be CMT.

Rather than seeing CMT as a completely original way of synthesizing musical and theatrical ideas, it is the amalgamation of the song writing techniques of traditional so-called "Golden Age" musical theater and those of the contemporary popular song (particularly with

reference to pop and rock mainstream chart music from the 1980s onwards). With regard to song structures, the 32-bar popular song form, developed at the epoch of the professional songwriting industry and synonymous with New York City's Tin Pan Alley, achieved widespread hegemony within the supposed "Golden Age" of musical theater. The leading composers of these styles, such as Richard Rodgers and Harold Arlen, utilized such AABA song structures for many key works that remain in the canon—"Favorite Things" from *The Sound of Music* and "Over The Rainbow" from *The Wizard of Oz*, for example. AABA songs get straight to the main theme of the song; there is no "chorus" as such, and the main hook of the song is often heard first. For example, in "Climb Every Mountain," the main lyrical and melodic idea is the first thing the performer sings: "Climb every mountain" (Rodgers and Hammerstein). By contrast, in a CMT song, such as "Waving through a Window" by Pasek and Paul, the lyrical and melodic hook is often delayed until the song's chorus.

CMT songwriting tends to merge this traditional theatrical song form with the popular music songwriting conventions of a VCVC (V = Verse, C = Chorus) song structure. CMT songs represent a hybrid of these two songwriting traditions, utilizing the hook-based chorus (often as a high-energy musical climax) of popular music songwriting yet adding nuance in the subtle yet dramatic B section typically associated with "Golden Age" musicals. This B section often manifests itself as a bridge, middle 8, or perhaps a prechorus segment within a CMT song. In fact, many CMT songs have a more complex song form inclusive of four different musical sections: verse, prechorus (PC), chorus, and bridge (B). Compare, for example, "Waving through a Window" from *Dear Evan Hansen*, a CMT song with a VVPCCVPCCBC structure, to "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" from *The Wizard of Oz*, which has a structure of AABAB.

These more complex song forms in CMT support another development of musical theater composition in the age of the "YouTubesical": the changing narrative structure. A musical theatre song from the supposed "Golden Age" tends to drive the narrative plot of its show with a small shift in onstage drama; the song often provides narrative progression from A to B. Popular music songs, conversely, are mostly non-narrative, exploring one emotional idea without change—they move from A to A. Aileen Lambert supports this by suggesting that "pop songs are to adjectives what musical theater

songs are to verbs.” CMT differs from both of these, as songs are often designed to work as standalone songs (much like popular music songs) outside of the context of the traditional book musical and often outside the environment of a theater. With the rise of compilation musical theater cabaret events, many of which are both officially and unofficially filmed and shared across digital platforms, songwriters now create songs that work in a standalone context that is perfect for the cabaret opportunities at their disposal. These songs are developed specifically with social media in mind, as one of the main forms of audience engagement, and social media thus forms an integral part of Virtual Broadway. Musical theater songwriter Sam Carner uses a term similar to CMT—“New Musical Theatre”—to describe a song that “stands alone, but has enough specificity and immediacy to give the impression that it could belong to a larger musical theatrical work.” These CMT songs often tell an entire self-contained story or narrative but still have a coherent plot, and such songs often cover a considerable journey—they move from A to Z.

Despite these more logistical aspects of song writing and lyrical narrative, there is a key and fundamental aspect of CMT songs that gives them a recognizable aesthetic: the theoretical and musical harmonic choices made with regards to tonality, chord choices, and key changes. CMT songs make frequent use of both suspended chords and power chords, which are often found in contemporary popular music. These types of chords add depth to a piece of music as they function in a more harmonically ambiguous way. That is to say, while major chords are often considered “happy” or upbeat and minor chords “sad” or downbeat, suspended chords and power chords lack these shallow mood perceptions and add a sense of drama. This pop music familiarity is combined with the use of modal interchange (chords from outside of the usual popular music major or minor tonal universes). Modal interchange is again a dramatic composition technique that can be found in “Golden Age” musical theater songs—this dramatic effect of modal interchange is further supported by the frequent use of modulations (or key changes), which are also commonplace in “Golden Age” musical theater but are often considered to be “cheesy,” “inappropriate,” or “too Disney” within popular music.

Giving such songs a modern musical aesthetic while paying homage to the dramatic musical elements popularized in the early days of musical theater allows new, digital age audiences to

experience the art form in a much more accessible way while still making reference to the origins of the form. These songs are increasingly experienced in digital environments, and contemporary musical theater songwriting has therefore altered to suit such environs with dramatic, catchy, hook-based melodic songs using contemporary instrumentation to convey storytelling to the audience in a short space of time. Attention span is key here. As noted above, writers have eight seconds to engage their virtual audience before they click the next tab or open the next video. Increasingly, pop music writers are creating material that gets straight to the point, with the vocal line often coming in the song's first eight seconds, often at the very beginning. Of the top ten popular music singles of 2018 in the United Kingdom, only two have introductions longer than ten seconds. Hubert Léveillé Gauvin believes that getting to the vocal in a song quickly helps grab attention in a digital age, and this shift in shortened intros is a result of the "attention economy" we now experience (qtd in Crane). An analysis of some of the most popular CMT videos on YouTube shows a similar structural pattern. Here, the vocal line comes in before eight seconds have passed in order to engage the online audience. Even songs with longer introductions such as "This Is Me" from *The Greatest Showman* respond to this trend by editing its introduction (which underscores the film's dramatic moments) so that the most popular YouTube version of the song opens with Keala Settle's evocative vocal performance (Figure 1).

"The Smartphone Hour"

Joe Iconis and Joe Tracz's musical *Be More Chill* demonstrates both the impact of the post-Internet participatory spectator and the CMT sound that Virtual Broadway has helped create. Aurally, the show is a mix of contemporary sounds and unconventional instrumentation (one of the only Broadway musicals ever to use a Theremin!), and there are CMT markers throughout the score, which Iconis has defined as a "maximalist pop fantasia" (qtd. in Evans, "New Golden"). "Michael in the Bathroom" is one of the flagship numbers from the show and is rated as the most popular song from *Be More Chill* on the music streaming service Spotify. The song contains many elements of CMT, such as notated vocal riffs, the use of modal



FIGURE 1. *Be More Chill* Photograph by Maria Baranova. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

interchange (shifting briefly to the Lydian mode in the chorus), the verse's use of almost exclusively suspended chords in its harmonic structure, and the vocal line coming in at seven seconds. Perhaps in an effort to appease the traditional musical theater gatekeepers, Iconis has been quick to link *Be More Chill* to its Broadway heritage, declaring that it is "as traditional as they come" ("Joe Iconis Breaks") and "100 percent a classic musical comedy" (qtd. in Fierberg). Yet, its route to Broadway has been anything but conventional, and it owes a huge debt to the show's digital native prosumers.

Be More Chill's story can be boiled down to the clichéd high school musical: "A nerdy, unpopular kid, desperate for social capital, makes a radical transformation, realizes his or her mistake and learns to be themselves again" (Appler). Or "angsty, unremarkable white boy . . . overreacts to his not-so-grave adversity and is . . . easily forgiven for selfish and reckless actions with potentially serious ramifications (see: Hansen, Evan)" (Russo). This musical's makeover sequence has a

cyber-twist; central protagonist Jeremy swallows a computer—a “SQUIP”—to “get an upgrade” and get the girl (Iconis, *Be More Chill*). This familiar narrative arc, coupled with the show’s inclusion of characters that can be read as queer with an overarching message of acceptance, might account for the musical’s popularity with the highly coveted teen and tween market.

Fans have “shipped” Jeremy and his best friend Michael; shipping is a fandom term which is used to propose and support potential relationships between characters. In an early scene, the “jock” character Rich (who later casually outs himself as bisexual) writes “Boyf” on Jeremy’s backpack and “riends” on Michael’s. This is a fairly standard high school story cliché—two friends bullied for their perceived homosexuality by the “cool” kid—but in this instance it has inspired extensive fan discussion. A post on Fandom.com⁷ has attracted 123 comments, one of which declares, “It’s totally canon” (“Boyf riends”). Fandom.com lists 42 different ships, with suitably snappy titles like “Pinkberry,” “Stagedorks,” and “Lesbihonest” (Be More Chill [musical] Wiki).

These fan engagements allow the teenage audience to explore and perform their own identities through their chosen ship, and they are encouraged by the show’s creatives, who intentionally leave characters open to queer readings. It is worth noting that the refusal of creators to pin down the sexuality of their characters decenters queerness, rather than placing it at the heart of the story. George Salazar (who originated the role of Michael) caused a Twitter storm in 2018 when he stated that he did not feel that Michael had a crush on Jeremy. He went on to explain that he had not made a decision to play or label Michael as gay (Salazar himself is gay) because this “doesn’t affect the course of the play,” and as “Michael is still in high school and figuring things out,” it would be “premature to stick a label on him. And what difference would it make?” (@georgesalazar). This fluidity is celebrated by most of the show’s fans who are growing up in a world that is by turns more polarized and less binary than ever. Several responses to Salazar touch on the pressure to label oneself, something widely discussed by young fan communities. This discussion between creatives and fans is hugely important to the show’s success, as choreographer Chase Brock stated in a recent interview, “[the fans] are speaking back to us, and we have a responsibility of listening” (qtd. by Wingroth). Indeed, as the show progressed from its original

version to the Broadway 3.0 version, Iconis and Tracz tweaked the libretto and score in response to fan feedback (McHenry).

“Broadway Here I Come”

Be More Chill did not always elicit such vociferous responses. The show premiered at Red Bank New Jersey’s Two River Theater to tepid reviews. *The New York Times* declared it “predictable in its contours, occasionally quirky in its details” (Isherwood), and as a result producers weren’t interested in giving the show a life beyond its initial run. Luckily for Iconis, Tracz, and the rest of the creative team, Two River Theater funded a cast recording in an effort to preserve the show. Following its release on October 31, 2015, everybody felt that the musical had run its course. However, in 2017, #BeMoreChill began trending across social media platforms, and original cast members, now in other productions, were being met at the stage door of their new shows by *Be More Chill* fans wanting to discuss the musical with them. This phenomenon mirrors Kirsty Sedgman’s concept of “no-object fandom.” Looking at the fictionalized *Bombshell* musical featured in the television series *Smash*,⁸ Sedgman explores “how audiences develop emotional associations with theoretical texts: ones that they have never seen in full, because these texts do not actually exist outside the fictional world” (145). The difference here is that audiences were engaging with a text they had never seen in full or live (fan sites share links to bootleg recordings and animated videos), but unlike *Smash’s Bombshell*, *Be More Chill* did exist outside of the fictional world and had the potential to do so again.

Fans of the virtual representations of *Be More Chill* streamed the cast recording over 350 million times and made the show the second most talked about musical, after *Hamilton*, on Tumblr, highlighting what Henry Jenkins has termed “convergence culture,” where “participants . . . interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (3). This lack of understanding was reflected in the continued reticence of producers to invest in the show, even after its ever growing international fan base—Iconis has stated that at a certain point, before plans to revive the show were in place, *Be More Chill’s* album sales were “better than every other Broadway show except the blockbusters *Hamilton* and *Dear Evan*

Hansen" (qtd. in Menta). In fact, it was not until the show was licensed for a production by Sacred Heart University students in Connecticut,⁹ which quickly sold out and attracted audiences from far and wide that producers began to notice the show's potential.

When the off-Broadway run sold out before it opened, drawing fans from "all 50 states, 18 countries and five continents from Madrid to Mississippi" (Brunner), it became clear that, to quote lead actor Will Roland, the musical was "a real thing . . . not some strange abstract internet idea" (qtd. in Brunner). Vincent Mosco and other scholars have articulated the tendency to distrust and devalue Internet sensations: "Because the digital world is made up of invisible electrons zipping through the air, there is a tendency to view it as immaterial" (213). Yet, *Be More Chill* provides a timely example of how a virtual piece of work can amass an almost cult-like following (no-object fandom) and translate that into a live performance that provides the commercial incentives that popular musical theater is so dependent on. When *Be More Chill* announced its transfer to Broadway (a signifier of musical theater status and success), it was quick to acknowledge the role of its prosumers in this process, tweeting, "Our little show that could is now on Broadway all thanks to YOU! Thank you, thank you, thank you!!!!" (@BeMoreChill). This tweet highlights the musical's outsider status with the show's narrative, synchronizing it with the experiences of its teenage fans. This marketing strategy, aligning the show to its audiences, evidently paid off as the musical set a new house record in its first week on Broadway at The Lyceum Theatre with a gross of \$738,383.50, \$154,350.50 more than previous record holder *Macbeth* (starring Patrick Stewart) in 2008 (Cordner).

Theater critic Ben Brantley somewhat sneeringly noted in his *New York Times* review that *Be More Chill* "may be the only show on Broadway that a tween could see and think happily, 'Hey, I could do that at home.'" This spectator engagement and allowance of fans to contribute is key to the show's success. Will Roland, who played Jeremy in *Be More Chill* and previously starred in *Dear Evan Hansen*, a show with a similar audience demographic and narrative arc, has noted the difference in audience performance between the two shows:

I mean, we had like 80 performances of *Be More Chill* Off Broadway. We probably had 1000 to 5000 separate people dress up as Michael or as Jeremy, and I could tell you that in 800 performances of *Dear Evan Hansen*, we did not have 1000 people come [dressed] as Evan. We had them—we had the people show up with their casts and their polos—but . . . I mean, truly, every night at *Be More Chill*—and we’re talking about an Off Broadway show that none of them had ever seen! None of them had seen it!

(qtd. in Duboff)

This “affective attachment,” which Sandvoss and Kearns believe is reflected in fan’s productivity “at the heart of the digitally driven rise of participatory culture” (91), has always been a huge part of the show’s success. As Tracz observes, the show’s digital ascendancy had nothing to do with teams of suited marketeers: “it wasn’t like suddenly Lin-Manuel Miranda tweeted about the show and people discovered it . . . It was people who love theater who were seeing themselves in the story” (qtd. in Menta). Interestingly, when the producers of the show have tried to create the same Internet buzz, they have not always had huge success. A marketing push on Facebook failed to tap into the show’s digital potency because it felt contrived and manufactured, missing its target audience because “Facebook is for old people now” (McHenry).

The former gatekeepers who were perplexed by the show’s appeal, declaring it “the equivalent of one of those high-pitched dog whistles that only those under 25 can hear” (Brantley), queried whether *Be More Chill* would be able to sustain its audience on Broadway with the Great White Way’s escalated ticket prices. It has not, and the show closed on August 10 after five months on Broadway, having failed to recoup its investment. However, the show highlights the shifting relationship between fans and Broadway musicals and the ways that “new media complicates the process” (Hillman-McCord 122). It also challenges the hierarchies and power structures at work as, Bay-Cheng et al. note, “[‘posthuman’ performances . . . shape social and cultural processes” (qtd. in Leeker et al. 13). Highlighting that virtual engagement with a fragment of a show can inspire extreme fandom powerful enough to propel a musical past the traditional gatekeepers. As Robert Wankel, president of the Shubert Organization, which owns the Lyceum Theatre, observed, *Be More Chill* has been “created by social media.” This is the Virtual Broadway musical

that gives other shows hope. If the fans start controlling which shows get to Broadway, perhaps we will start to see a shift in the shows produced and more diverse stories being told. If the “concern is no longer with the fourth wall (between ‘actor’ and ‘audience’) but instead with the firewall” (Dixon 23), perhaps the “failures of imagination” that director Rachel Chavkin called out in her 2019 Tony Award acceptance speech (Rubin) will be resolved. It is interesting to consider whether, following the success of *Be More Chill* and its unconventional route to Broadway, Joe Iconis still stands by the statement that he made in 2014: “I wouldn’t necessarily put a song from a book musical on YouTube—an honest-to-goodness book musical should be experienced from start to finish” (qtd. in Evans, “How the Web”). Rob Rokicki and Joe Tracz’s musical *The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical* has just enjoyed a run on Broadway following its own social media propulsion, and *Six*—Toby Marlowe and Lucy Moss’s social media savvy, revisionist take on Henry VIII’s wives—adds a Broadway run to its crown, demonstrating that while Broadway is still the destination of choice for popular musical theater, increasingly, social media is the tool to get there. Whether future audiences will continue to engage with musicals in this arena rather than the more performative platforms of the digital world remains to be seen.

“You’ll Be Back”: Virtual Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic—A Postscript

On March 12, 2020, Broadway went dark. *Six* postponed its opening night, and other shows closed their doors, destined to never return to the Great White Way. Four days later, following government advice to help slow the spread of the coronavirus, the West End followed suit. As Vincent notes, “Forced to shutter live seasons, performing arts organisations collectively jumped on the digital bandwagon,” and there was suddenly a proliferation of virtual theatrical content, most of which was available for free. The use of digital platforms allowed arts organizations to engage a wider and more diverse audience, who enjoyed being able to access shows at times that worked for them, rather than being bound by traditional matinee and evening performance times. This audience engagement allowed arts

organizations to “communicate the importance of the arts as a source of comfort and inspiration during a time of crises, while simultaneously reaching a far wider audience than their physical spaces could ever hold” (Vincent).

The National Theatre took advantage of their National Theatre Live portfolio and streamed sixteen productions on YouTube over four months, reaching “9 million households from 173 countries” (Wood). To accommodate this virtual audience in the National Theatre would require filling the theater’s largest space, the Olivier, once a day for the next thirty-five years (Wood). Virtual audiences were encouraged to donate instead of purchasing a ticket, but levels of donation for virtual streams have been “remarkably low” (Bird qtd in “Impact of COVID-19 on DCMS sectors: First Report.”). As the majority of British theaters have less than three months reserves, more financially sustainable models of virtual engagement need to be explored to safeguard the sector (Bird qtd. in “Impact of COVID-19 on DCMS sectors: First Report.”).

Not all digital arts content has struggled to achieve financial viability. Disney’s UK launch coincidentally coincided with the country entering lockdown, becoming an entertainment lifeline for many. The company’s decision to bring forward the much-anticipated screening of the original production of *Hamilton* by a year created much buzz and a significant increase in subscriptions. In April, May, and June, the platform averaged one million new members a month (Solsman). However, the weekend that *Hamilton* was released, the platform witnessed a 74 percent jump in digital subscriptions in the United States and a 46.6 percent increase worldwide, not counting subscribers who signed up through their televisions (Mendelson).

As some UK venues have reopened, there has been a need to think creatively in order to engage audiences, ensure compliance with COVID-19 safety restrictions, and generate much needed income. In July, Beverley Knight performed in the first socially distanced performance, which reviewers termed a “strange affair” (Gompertz), as the audience’s masks disrupted the autopoietic feedback loop between audience and performer. However, such precautions are now the norm, and audiences are becoming increasingly used to them. In order to mitigate the loss of income that social distancing creates, some theaters are starting to give audiences the option to “attend” online performances of live productions. Manchester’s Hope Mill

Theatre's socially distanced production of *Rent* quickly sold out, but tickets for the limited prerecorded and edited online performances were announced shortly after.

Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic inspired innovations within musical theater it has also exacerbated the presence of "Virtual Broadway." *A Killer Party: A Murder Mystery Musical* seized the opportunity of an online audience yearning for musical theater content and created a serialized contemporary musical theater production, largely marketed through social media and filmed remotely from the homes of many household Broadway names, including Jeremy Jordan (*Newsies*, *The Last Five Years*) and Carolee Carmelo (*Sister Act*, *Parade*). These six- to eight-minute episodes—attention span friendly—are available to purchase as an entire season for a modest \$12.99 (compared with standard Broadway seat prices) to meet the expectations of an audience that is becoming increasingly accustomed to the etiquette and practices of Virtual Broadway. The work has been so successful that in the week following the show's launch, *Musical Theatre International* purchased the rights to license the musical for amateur performances as a standalone, ninety-minute piece, demonstrating the disruptive power that Virtual Broadway can have, as well as its future potential.

As the pandemic continues to rage, with areas of the United Kingdom facing increased restrictions that prevent live theater attendance and Broadway extending its shutdown until June 2021, the need for innovation and engagement with Virtual Broadway grows. With no definitive end in sight, producers and creators need to think outside the proscenium arch to ensure a future for our industry.

Notes

1. Waugh identifies the post-Internet generation as those with "little experience of a world without constant connectivity or social media." Waugh terms those that were born or reached pubescence in the mid-2000s or later the "Internet generation for whom the web was something new, rather than a natural element of daily existence."
2. As John Kenrick discusses, *The Merry Widow* (1905) inspired a variety of related merchandise ranging from cigars to corsets (98).
3. Such as Patti Lupone, Lea Salonga, and Aaron Tveit.
4. To contextualize the significance of Rodgers and Hammerstein, we need only explore the recent success of *The Greatest Showman* (2017). The film's soundtrack recently became the longest-running number one soundtrack in the United Kingdom in fifty years, maintaining the coveted spot for eighteen nonconsecutive weeks. However, Pasek and Paul have been unable to displace

- The Sound of Music* (1959), which spent seventy weeks at number one, or *South Pacific* (1949), which spent an unprecedented one hundred and fifteen weeks at number one.
5. There are some differences in opinion as to when the “Golden Age” began, when it ended, and if it even existed. For the purposes of this article, the authors consider the supposed “Golden Age” to start with *Oklahoma!* in 1943 and end with *Fiddler on the Roof* in 1964.
 6. Adam Rush recently explored digital fandom and *Dear Evan Hansen* in his paper, “#You-WillBeFound: Marketing the ‘Other’ in *Dear Evan Hansen*,” at the Song, Stage and Screen XIII conference at University of California, Los Angeles, 2018.
 7. In order to work ethically with fan-produced material, particularly that which is produced by young audiences, citations have been paraphrased and not directly referenced. However, they can be easily found on these and similar sites.
 8. Joe Iconis wrote two CMT songs for *Smash*, one of which was “Broadway Here I Come.”
 9. Rodgers and Hammerstein Theatricals picked up the amateur rights for *Be More Chill* in 2017.

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