

Whose Stories Determine Success on Broadway?

Layla Williams

HUM346

Wouter Haverals

May 7, 2024

The success of a Broadway show cannot be determined by financials alone. It is not necessarily a field that can be defined objectively, so that means the tools that we use to define them and the methods we employ to interrogate them will also be subjective in nature as well. As we try to categorize Broadway as an art form, there will be biases that come into place about the level of art. Is it a form of “high” art that people watch for purely aesthetic purposes? Is it a form of “low” art that people watch for entertainment based purposes? This is emphasized on Broadway because of the cost of attendance. Today, the average price for a Broadway ticket is \$189.¹ Therefore, attending Broadway is a matter of committing resources (time to travel, proximity to New York, cost of tickets) that is not of luxury to everyone who might be interested in attending. This tends to skew how Broadway looks in more ways than one.

In their article “Relationships among Indicators of Success in Broadway Plays and Motion Pictures” Elizabeth Hirschman and Andrew Pieros try to create categories of Broadway plays and films based on their extent of success and critical acclaim. Based on these qualities they argue that “the Broadway play critic...attempts to adopt a posture of scientific objectivity in evaluating the performance,” but how could the critics be objective about something as subjective as a piece of theatre?² And how could the researchers reassert this impossible objectivity? It is also important to note that this source was submitted in the *Journal of Cultural Economics*, so the writers would have been more focused on the scientific approaches themselves. This article was also written in 1985; in an article written more recently, the scholars have conflicting views pertaining to the conceived binary of art versus entertainment.

There is no one answer to the questions of trying to categorize art. This is why we come up with arbitrary categories for the purposes of conversation. And this is one of the primary

¹ “Broadway Tickets,” *Seat Geek*, <https://seatgeek.com/broadway-tickets>.

² Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Andrew Pieros, “Relationships among Indicators of Success in Broadway Plays and Motion Pictures,” *Journal of Cultural Economics* 9 (1): 35-63, 1985.

considerations of scholars when it comes to trying to figure out what makes a Broadway show “successful.” Much of the literature uses interviews, archival correspondence, or conversations about the shows themselves.³ By bringing in the methods of the digital humanities, I expand the possibility of how we can understand what might make a Broadway show successful.

I am also not just looking at every single aspect of Broadway shows to exist. I am not viewing the shows in an entirely holistic process as well. I am particularly interested in whether or not Broadway shows that feature diverse casts, stories, or shows that were written by person of color (POC) playwrights are doomed to close well before more “mainstream” forms of theater typically written by or starring white playwrights or actors? Can accolades, great reviews, and high audience attendance save a show from closing and promise it to have a long run? How big of a factor does race play when it comes to the success of Broadway shows? For example, I am reminded of the case of the musical *A Strange Loop* by Black queer playwright Michael R. Jackson. The musical explores the experience of a fat, queer Black man in New York as his thoughts embody and help him deal with the conflicts of his everyday life. The show won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 2022. It received critical acclaim, and audiences loved it. In the end, the show closed in 9 months. Academy accolades and great sales were not enough to save the show. How much of an influence did the writer and subject being a Black man have to do with the show’s short run? These are the initial questions that have sparked my interest in proposing this research project. In the project I plan to explore the questions: what stories make the most on Broadway? Whose stories make the most on Broadway? What factors contribute to the shows that have the longest runs?

³ Elizabeth L. Wollman "How to Dismantle a [Theatric] Bomb: Broadway Flops, Broadway Money, and Musical Theater Historiography," *Arts* 9, no. 2: 66, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts9020066>

In order to answer these questions, I would like to access the Internet Broadway Database (a database which lists out all characteristics of the show including who might have been cast, what awards the show was nominated for, the themes within the show, which theater house the show took place in, etc.) and the Broadway League of Attendance (tracks the grosses of each show). This Broadway League of Attendance can be used as supplemental material to the Internet Broadway Database, which has information about the budget of each show. I could compare the allotted budget of the show to its gross and profits. In other words, did the show get a return on its investment? Finally, I would create my own corpus of plays and musical libretti. Since this last dataset does not necessarily exist as of yet, I propose to create it by scanning a collection of all the most contemporary Broadway plays and musicals produced in the past 20 years (this includes revivals of older works) and scanning the content of each book into one larger corpus simply entitled “Broadway.” I do recognize that this final dataset may be difficult to accomplish because the licensing on Broadway shows tends to be especially restrictive. As someone who is heavily involved in student theater on campus, I understand the guidelines and regulations that surround the use and reproduction of theatrical scripts. However, I think that the nature of my research falls under the fair use agreements as discussed in Kenneth Haggerty’s article. In reference to the case of *Harper & Row Publishers v The Nation Enterprises*, Haggerty argues that the Supreme Court said despite the four categories that would be considered under fair use, the one that would be taken as the topmost priority would always be the effect on the market.⁴ Similar to our research with the corpus of the *Harry Potter* series, the content of the scripts would be mixed up within the corpus, so we would not be able to reproduce any of the work in a way that would infringe upon existing copyright. Also, the nature of theatre is live, so I

⁴ Kenneth Haggerty, “Intellectual Property Guidelines for the Digital Humanities,” *Routledge International Handbook of Research Methods in Digital Humanities*, edited by Kristen Schuster and Stuart Dunn, Routledge, 2020, pp. 428–40.)

do not think that sharing giant bags of words would necessarily harm the large professional theater houses if someone happens to catch a line or two from one of the shows included in the corpus.

But how am I using these different databases, and how is the information within them serving each other? Using the corpus of libretti and play scripts, I will use topic modeling to track different themes and topics within the corpus. Topic modeling “produces both the hidden topic structure and the observed words of the text.”⁵ In other words, topic modeling would be a useful method to use because it could reveal larger patterns and structures about what is going on in the larger category and corpus, but it also allows me to break down the data all the way down to the individual word level. This will allow me to approach the actual texts of the plays and the musicals before considering other factors (such as the actual quality of the production, who might have been cast, any awards the show might have won). I will use topic modeling to track what are the most frequent themes in some of the most successful plays and musicals. Are these the shows that might discuss more Anglophone or American based ideals? Do the shows that incorporate cultural intricacies find themselves typically ostracized from the rest of the corpus?

I must also approach what I learn from the libretti and playscripts in a nuanced way, especially because topic modeling tends to approach the data from a mostly statistical point of view. Therefore, the tool would only track the number of times a theme or word was used but not necessarily the emotional context or specific scenario that it was used in. For example, a show like the musical *Ragtime* might include a lot of African Americans, but the show is not necessarily one that uplifts Black voices. The only two Black characters within it die in violent ways before the curtain closes. However, because race is important within this show, any mentions of Black or African American might make this show seem more inclusive than it

⁵ Blei, David M. “Topic Modeling and Digital Humanities.” *Journal of Digital Humanities*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012.

actually is. This is a more explicit example from a show outside of my designated data collection. A more recent example would be how *Hamilton* might fare. Though the entire cast of the show (sans the white actor who plays King George) being POC, there is never any explicit mention of the actors' race within the plot of the show. Themes focus more on Americanism, meritocracy, and identity as an immigrant. This example of "racial neoliberal inclusion" is an illusion of inclusion beyond the physical sense.⁶ The messages shared within the show do not account for the structural inequalities that affect POC, but it talks about the opportunity that America brings. It is more of a performance of diversity in this example, especially when it comes to topic modeling. If the topic model were to read *Hamilton*, it would probably envision hope and Americanism as key themes, and it would probably never think to mention diverse casts.

Moreover, the financial practices of Broadway tend to be pretty elusive. Not even the people in charge of the money always know where it is going. That is also what makes it difficult to track why some shows closed faster than others outside of purely economic reasons. Elizabeth Wollman claims that the "historiographic distance to the commercial side of the art-commerce equation stems in part from the fact that the American commercial theater industry tends to seriously downplay its own commercial trappings."⁷ In the footnote of this quote, Wollman argues that this elusive behavior stems from scholar's general disagreement of what forms of art should be counted as art and what needs to be separated into commercial entertainment. In conversation with Hirschman and Pieros, Wollman sets the divided state among the Academy in a more transparent tone about 35 years later. And 35 years later there is still no agreement. This

⁶ Sarah Courtis, Melissa Merchant & Ellin Sears (2022) Hope, Performative Diversity and re-production: Hamilton and COVID-era Politics, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 43:6, 791-809, DOI: 10.1080/07256868.2022.2128084

⁷ Wollman, "How to Dismantle a [Theatric] Bomb," 2-3.

demonstrates that the conversation is still ongoing and needs to be explored by pursuing this project.

In tandem with the topic modeling, I also plan to complement this research with the use of Voyant Tools as a supporting visualization of the more statistical forms of data. I think it would be helpful to see relative bubble maps or webs that depict which shows receive the most funding, have highest grosses, get the best reviews, and/or have the longest runs on Broadway in relation to what the topic modeling might have revealed about the actual themes and content of the shows themselves. I see this research as something that begins qualitatively, building off what other scholars have done by using their interviews and field work as a baseline, and then supporting that qualitative work through quantitative data and information. The quantitative aspects come from my digital humanities methods, particularly what the use of Voyant tools (with input from the Internet Broadway Database and Broadway League of Attendance) paired with the information gained from the topic modeling would demonstrate about whose stories make the most on Broadway.

Historically, shows that have been by or about POC have been underrepresented and underappreciated on Broadway. For example, Wollman explores what it means for a Broadway show to be a “flop” as something purely thought about in financial terms.⁸ This is because, as previously mentioned, it is near impossible to draw aesthetic guidelines around Broadway shows. One of the shows considered a flop was *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* by Melvin Van Peebles, which was criticized by white critics and audiences for being too controversial. Peebles' business partner argued that the only way in order to ensure the success of future shows for POC was to make sure that “[We need] to build our own audience, set up our own systems,

⁸ Wollman, 4.

independent of white society.”⁹ They argued that the only way to be successful on Broadway was to simply escape it and make their own.

However, when looked at in context with the color line in the music industry, as explored by Paul G. Baretta, this separatist lens might have been more harmful to POC artists than beneficial (at least in the economic sense). Baratta claims that the “production of crossover music was a means of fueling expansion, adapting products of African-American artists to be consumed by the more profitable mainstream market.”¹⁰ So, while Black artists could separate themselves (a lasting result from legal segregation in the music industry) from mainstream music, they would make more money if they were able to blend musical styles and make it on the mainstream radio stations. Putting Baretta in conversation with Wollman suggests that the same might apply for Broadway plays. Even though Broadway plays with stories about or by POC might not always have the longest runs, do they have a longer run on Broadway with more visibility than they might have gotten in a local or regional theater company? What are the intangible factors to consider when it comes to the costs and benefits of Broadway as a POC?

Upon completion of this research project, I think a possible form of dissemination could be through the creation of a story map of some form. Academics are still arguing the age-old question of what makes something considered art. I think the story map could begin with the results of the topic modeling and show a list of topics without revealing what the topics mean. The more they scroll down the page, more information would be revealed. They would learn that these topics are from some of the most long running and highest grossing shows on Broadway. They would then be able to compare to shows with less successful runs and see if there is a correlation between the identities of the people whose stories are being told and the length of the

⁹ Wollman, 10.

¹⁰ Paul G. Baretta, “Tracing the color line in the American music market and its effect on contemporary music marketing,” *Arts and the Market* 7 (2), 2017, DOI: 10.1108/AAM-08-2016-0016, 213-234.

run on Broadway. I think the summary portion of the story map would be a map of all of the theater houses on Broadway and the history of the shows that they have produced in the past 20 years. We could then track if there is a correlation between the theater house, the kinds of shows they produce, and the relative success of that particular show.

I hypothesize that shows that are about or by Black, brown, and other people of color do not have as long of runs on Broadway based on the themes within the show. This occurs regardless of accolades, reviews, or grosses but occurs rather due to underlying structural inequalities regarding the uplift of stories of POC on Broadway. If the action is not intentional to highlight art by POC, they will fall victim to the structures that have tried to hold them down.

This paper represents my own work in accordance to University regulations.

/s/ Layla Williams

Bibliography

Baretta, Paul G.. "Tracing the color line in the American music market and its effect on contemporary music marketing." *Arts and the Market* 7 (2), 2017, DOI: 10.1108/AAM-08-2016-0016, 213-234.

Blei, David M. "Topic Modeling and Digital Humanities." *Journal of Digital Humanities*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012.

"Broadway Tickets," Seat Geek, <https://seatgeek.com/broadway-tickets>.

Courtis, Sarah, Melissa Merchant & Ellin Sears. "Hope, Performative Diversity and re-production: Hamilton and COVID-era Politics." *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 43:6, 2022, 791-809, DOI: 10.1080/07256868.2022.2128084

Haggerty, Kenneth. "Intellectual Property Guidelines for the Digital Humanities." *Routledge International Handbook of Research Methods in Digital Humanities*, edited by Kristen Schuster and Stuart Dunn, Routledge, 2020, pp. 428–40.)

Hirschman, Elizabeth C. and Andrew Pieros. 1985. "Relationships among Indicators of Success in Broadway Plays and Motion Pictures." *Journal of Cultural Economics* 9 (1): 35-63.

Wollman, Elizabeth L. "How to Dismantle a [Theatric] Bomb: Broadway Flops, Broadway Money, and Musical Theater Historiography" *Arts* 9, no. 2: 66, 2020.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/arts9020066>