

The Portman Hotel, Act III

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Broadway is currently casting the Portman Hotel as the bad guy in a municipal melodrama of greed and destruction. The title is, "How the Helen Hayes, Morosco and Bijou Theaters Were Lost to Rapacious Real Estate; or, Portman, Go Home." It is particularly sad to see this script playing so well to the acting profession, which has a large stake in the survival and therefore revival of the Times Square theater district.

The real story is melodramatic enough, something of a cliffhanger. The hotel was never quite able to get its financing together, a difficulty not helped by the present controversy or by delay in a time of soaring interest rates. The project, which New York needs more than ever, was conceived seven years ago as the kind of dramatic and useful new construction that could spark a reversal of Broadway's long decline. Today, with some noticeable improvements in the area and developers showing interest, the Portman would have an even better chance of turning Times Square around.

That gain would not cancel out the loss of three theaters on the hotel site. But at least one adjoining theater, the 46th Street, would be restored, a new 1,500-seat theater would be built as part of the hotel, and Shubert Alley would be extended another block. Theater people should also consider the long-term benefits of 2,000 first-class hotel rooms, indoor and outdoor restaurants and a redesigned Broadway Plaza fronting the

block. All this will do a great deal to make the neighborhood a safer, sounder, pleasanter place. The project can have an immediate vitalizing effect, without the costs and complexities of urban renewal.

What the protesting artists are really telling us, correctly, is that New York cannot afford to lose its smaller, older theaters. Their perception of new, large theaters as lacking in charm and tradition and limited in function is accurate. But they have gotten their targets and heavies mixed. Times Square still has a rich inventory of fine old houses, including some that could be reclaimed for legitimate use. That has already happened with the Apollo and the Rialto; the city also helped save the Little Theater and the Ritz. And everyone seems to have forgotten that the Helen Hayes itself was rescued from dereliction not too long ago.

The theater battle cannot be resolved on one street. The city and the Broadway community need to put their resources and expertise together to plan for the district as a whole. The present zoning, which encourages the construction of new theaters but does nothing to keep the old ones, has to be corrected. But opposing new construction is wrongheaded. It would be more to the point to negotiate the guaranteed restoration of theaters that are the equal of the Helen Hayes and Morosco. Lovers of Broadway should concentrate on what they can gain, not on what they can stop.

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