

On, Off, and off-off Broadway in 2006

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This essay strives to define an industry of art, within a unit of time. Of the fine art forms: poetry, painting, prose writing, theatre; the last is in a constant state of flux and changes much more rapidly than the others. In fact, it is questionable if theater is a fine art, though theater always manages to prove it is a fine art. It is just the most questioned about its status. Music and acting are not, for example, fine arts, and neither is basket-weaving, because music and art are not created by artists using subconscious to form a real tangible thing, though they may evoke emotions in people. There is some gray and the boundaries are not precise. But a play is a thing and the words can be poetry, but only with the aid of the acting and all the other facets. The words of a play, alone, are not poems, though they may resemble poetry. But a play, in its full grandeur, is a poem. Which brings me to lesson one, which we've all heard before: theater is a business, which somehow will always exist with its feet both firmly planted in the world of art and commerce. How this can occur I do not understand and it is not important why. Unfortunately, you must accept my initial premises to continue reading my essay; and, I sincerely apologize, reader, for any discomfort this may cause.

There are many musicals being produced on Broadway, some of which are so immature, I deem an estranged cousin to Community Theater and certainly not art. But, I am not at Broadway (I hesitate to say 'yet', because I am not sure if want to set my goals on making it to Broadway, just yet), and if Broadway wants to pursue money, exclusively, via Community Theatre, I could care less. I am off-off Broadway; and, my energies are focused here. Off-Broadway and Broadway have evolved into the very same thing. (More on this in a moment.) Unlike a critic, however, I am an artist; so, I am capable of changing my working environment. This is why critics always seem so intimidating, because they are masquerading as artists and they are not, of course. A critic holds up a calling card of an artist and then proceeds to speak for the artist. And, an artist critiquing his own medium is much more intense than an ordinary critic doing it. For example, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allen Poe's criticism of theater or poetry is powerful and cuts especially deep; in part, because they are great writers; but also because they are turning inward.

Musicals are, however, still a play; but here is a crucial point: when something is stretched very thin, it loses its strength and cohesion. A musical stretches every aspect of a play very thin. The acting is not acting, because the characters are singing and no one sings in real life, unless they are getting paid. The poetry of the words is non-existent, because there is little, if any, real dialogue; and, of the dialogue there is, it is only there to set up the songs. The score, standing on its own, is not true art, as I have said. All we have is the musical's story; or, the full measure of the thing, which can be art; but this is the only strong point of a musical, existing in an already questionable art form.

Broadway can be tentatively defined as one of the large, main theaters in New York City, around 42nd Street, of a certain size. The definition of Off Broadway is very shaky, because the size delineating Broadway and Off-Broadway is not clear. I have heard 500 seats is a Broadway theater house. But, I have also heard 200, 300, 1000. Also, location is a factor, unlike in the past, because is the Brooklyn Academy of Music Off-Broadway? I would consider BAM a Broadway-size theater house and it is certainly the main theater in Brooklyn, and Brooklyn is in New York City; but simply because BAM is not near 42nd Street, it must be Off-Broadway. But, it is hard to equate certain Off-Broadway theaters, such as (old) Cherry Lane Theater in Greenwich Village, or the Zipper Theater, with BAM. And, no, I hold no allegiance to Brooklyn. Still, I don't think any of this will ever change. Broadway will always be technically defined as 42nd Street.

Though few will admit it (or care to), the line between Off-Broadway and off-off Broadway has solidified, even as the line between Broadway and Off-Broadway has become more and more obscure. Each time I hear the definition of off-off Broadway told me by someone, I see the person's eyes set and his or her face harden: 99 seats. Then, the person walks away, silently. Which begs the question: If a theater is over 100 seats, such as the Producers' Club largest space, and it is even on 44th Street and 8th avenue (right off Broadway), is the Producers' Club Off-Broadway theater? Everyone I have posed this question to says most adamantly **no**; the reason being the shows are not Off-Broadway level, which is an ambiguous reply. I had one of my plays performed at the Producers' Play and the room was packed and it sure felt as if I were Off-Broadway; especially, after seeing some of the shows at the Off-Broadway level.

off-off Broadway started as a movement, in the 60s. Off Broadway has existed for a long time, even the Group Theater was performing there, back in the 30s, wherever 'there' was, as the locations of theater districts are in constant flux. But, off-off Broadway has morphed from a psychedelic trip/political protest at Joe Cino's Caffe Cino into a form of professional theater, with specific rules, money changing hands, loyal followings, which I deem the Mafioso of Misfits.

In order to understand this Mafioso, I must follow the money. But first, back to Broadway, where producing a musical can cost 20 million dollars. A Broadway play costs a fraction of a musical; but still several millions. An Off-Broadway play costs around 1 million to produce, or less. So, there is an arbitrary line demarking Broadway and Off-Broadway, which is made of money. It would seem only so much money can be thrown into an Off-Broadway production, if only because – whatever the number of exact seats – a few hundred tickets are not going to net a fortune. And, location has something to do with ticket sales, which is why Broadway has a lot of musicals, catering to tourists and the mayor. Nonetheless, if it takes a million or more dollars to produce a play at 59 East 59th Street, which is considered Off-Broadway, though it is a very fancy, elaborate building, and the theater is excellent, with superb equipment; yet, only one hundred thousand – or much, much less – to produce a play at Blue Heron Arts Center or Collective Unconscious, there is an evident disparity in the definition of Off-Broadway, if we consider money.

But really, there is no disparity. If the upper limit of the cost of producing a play Off-Broadway is 1-3 million dollars, it means this is a Broadway production, because the cost of producing a Broadway play is about the same; and, things like location, house size theater district, are ambiguous and no longer major factors in clearly defining boundaries. Again, in addition to house size, the line is very clear between Off-Broadway and off-off Broadway: There are no off-off Broadway productions with a budget of 1 million or even one hundred thousand dollars. The budget for an off-off Broadway is a few thousand dollars or much less. I produce professional, reviewed plays for about \$250 and the figure continues to decrease. People might produce an off-off Broadway play for \$25,000 or more; but their production differs from mine in no way, professionally. Both plays are professionally produced, off-off Broadway, in the heart of New York City; spending more money on sets changes nothing.

So, we have Broadway, which is busy producing childish musicals for tourists and an occasional play; but Broadway's plays are no different than any found Off-Broadway, in terms of cost or quality; or, even number of tickets sold, length of run, popularity, critic's choice, etceteras. And, Off-Broadway, most of which is really Broadway, in virtually every sense: location, budget, quality, critic's choice, popularity, etceteras. Finally, there is off-off Broadway, which is a world unto its own. And, while I greatly value the artistic independence and integrity of off-off Broadway, there are many things I do not like about it. One quick aside: off-off Broadway's integrity has very little to do with the fact those of us producing plays here don't have the same budgets of Off-Broadway or Broadway. Integrity can be bought for a few meager dollars, if the person is willing to sell. Willingly starving artists because one believes money changes everything if stupid, greedy, and does not support anything. If one believes in the art of a play, one should support it with pride. If you are investing in Off-Broadway or Broadway in 2006, then you are supporting your own pocketbook, not art or theater.

The only definable thing is the art being created. Having a large budget does not make a play great. A well-performed Shakespeare play, with minimal sets and costumes, is no different in a 50-seat playhouse, than a 500-seat one. There are many bad plays being created. If off-off Broadway is, by its very nature, experimental, it is still producing plays on par with Off-Broadway and even Broadway, with ease. Nowadays, there are so many critics and sterling professors, and so few artists, a work of art can be immediately beautified and enshrined in the canon. Thus, the chosen few are elevated each theatrical season, be the liberal elite. But, this means *not a thing*.

Here in off-off Broadway, we are not making a dime! It takes much more skill to produce a play with no money, than with a lot of money. Throwing money at something does not fix the problem. Artists working for free and the love of their art are true artists. Well, so are artists working professionally; but somehow the former has more heart to it.

Plays on and Off-Broadway have become extremely formulaic, the way movies have. The reason is because a formulaic play is highly marketable. It has 3-5 characters (or only one), 2 acts, crisp dialogue, a liberal theme, a high-priced set, excellent costumes, a star, and not much else.

This brings me to the real meat of this essay: How do we define good and Quality Theater in 2006? There are some basic rules, applying to all things in life. Theater is not excluded from these rules. I have a degree in science, so I prefer scientific, empirical method of analysis i.e. there is such a thing as obvious truth. If a playwright has people who keep returning to see his plays, he may be good. In all manner of regular, independent, paying customers who see his plays continuously proclaim their love for them, and the actors thoroughly enjoy portraying the characters, his plays are likely good. If the critics admit they liked the playwright's plays, despite their contradictory objections, his plays may be good. If the playwright's plays cross boundaries and genre, and the plays are original and experimental; but the above still holds true, his plays are likely good. There are other observations I have not listed. If all of these observations are taken together, it is possible to conclude a playwright's plays are good. A work of art is either good and art, or bad and not art, both pairs being mutually exclusive. You cannot have a bad work of art; or, a good (great) play, which is not a work of art. Presumably, cream rises to the top; but if there is a thick layer of sludge blocking the cream, it will not rise.

But, doing the things I've just listed does not mean one is producing (great) art. It is much harder to define what great art is, and I am not going to attempt it in this essay. Really, only time can define great art. My point is: There is virtually zero good art being produced right now, in America. How can I say this? Well, because, first of all, the plays I see are all obviously bad. Still, some people love them, because they must rationalize their time and expenses somehow.

Money-driven producers (and their investors) on Broadway do not care if a play is art or not. A "name" actor (or director) can greatly enhance a play's monetary return; but it has little to do with the play's success as art. Such actors come from Hollywood. Directors on and Off-Broadway are tied to formulaic plays, making them weaker directors, because formula is not art the way experimentation is art. Take away the "names" and the level of talent is extremely high off-off Broadway, and at the same level as on or Off-Broadway. The same is true for directing. In fact, many actors frequently cross between Off-Broadway and off-off. But, if an actor has made it to Broadway, he or she rarely returns to work off-off Broadway again, and graduates into the movies. The challenge is not to find a great actor (union or not); but to find a new way to think about acting. Acting involves subconscious communication, by a cast; in the same way an artist uses his or her subconscious to produce a work of art. But, this essay's purpose is not to solve problems; but merely to define them. Nor if I were satirizing the problems, would it would not be my job to fix them. The acting troupe I founded, La Muse Venale, Inc. seeks to create new artistic styles and create art through theater.

off-off Broadway reminds me a lot of high school and I did horrible in high school (though I am doing well off-off Broadway). Power centers are found in various theater companies and not theater houses, since and off-off Broadway productions have nothing to gain by paying for an expensive venue. There are various fiefdoms, like in high school: the jocks, the punks, the nerds, the "artists", etceteras. Everyone is broke; except,

for a couple of rich kids, who are popular only because of their money. And, there are plenty of egos, pecking orders, “status”, and fights. But, off-off Broadway is also like a third rail; it is very close to the real train (on and Off-Broadway) and it is a live wire. So, it is something between high school and maturity – or, just shy of the real Mafia: it is the Mafioso of Misfits.

In sum, Broadway and Off-Broadway really is the same thing, if we exclude musicals. The money of both things can be defined, and even the house size relates to the money. off-off Broadway is a world unto its own. Being successful in theater takes building a fiefdom first. And, perhaps this is how it always has been. Every great playwright built up his empire in stages. A play is collaboration. In order to determine the worth of a play – if it is good art – it must be subjected to close scrutiny first, by the collective. The same can be said of the playwright.

I suppose I can be called a “late bloomer”; but this is not accurate. Fact is: I am a writer, and I have been blooming all my life. The only thing, which has changed, is I am now able to clearly see what I am up against. The line between the arts and money is the boundary separating on and Off-Broadway from off-off Broadway. By definition, theater exists in both worlds. I have graduated from my understanding of the art of theater; but I have not yet obtained a job in professional theater, because no one will give me any work. And, they will not give me any work, because I will not play by their rules. So, the only option is to destroy this world, which denies me advancement, as an artist. I am using the tools I have developed all my life to slam the gates of this hell with a huge battering ram – others have joined me – and the fasteners and the hinges are beginning to wear. And, I swear upon my very soul, when this gate blasts open, I am entering the city and I am going to burn it to the ground! Destroying you is what motivates me. And, if you think I will not accomplish this feat, you are a fool. Prepare yourselves.