

How to Enjoy NYC's Theater Scene Beyond Broadway

By JENNY HART Published On 05/29/2019

“All the world’s a stage” is one of literature’s most famous metaphors, and in New York City, it’s pretty close to the truth. The five boroughs are swarming with performers -- actors, singers, dancers -- all dreaming of their big break. Together, they form the most vibrant, diverse, and magnificent theater scene in the world.

That scene, of course, is most often associated with Broadway -- anchored in Times Square, illuminated by bright lights and digital billboards, and home to the *crème de la crème* of performing arts pros. Seeing a Broadway show, whether for the first or 40th time, always feels like an *event*. The theaters are beautiful, the talent is palpable, and the hush that falls over the audience just before curtain is a shared moment pregnant with hope and appreciation.

However. Broadway theater tickets are expensive. The average admission to a play last year was \$89.17; musicals were \$125.70. Shows skew commercial to appeal to the mainstream. Crowds and long lines can be exasperating. And you must traverse the dreaded Times Square to get there. But The Great White Way’s few dozen theaters make up just a sliver of our theater landscape. Even if the lights went out on Broadway and never came back on, our wider kaleidoscope of performances would barely dim.

Beyond the boundaries of the Theater District, New York City has oodles of options to remedy the perennial resolution to *see more theater*. Off-Broadway (and its close kin Off-Off-Broadway) offerings tend to be more affordable, more intimate, more apt to take risks, and more accessible. They’re also not just *in* the city, but *of* the city, enriched and informed by all the real life drama you’ll encounter every day in any borough.

Theater's magic is derived from the living, breathing, feeling people right in front of you. They display emotions -- grief, rage, remorse, ecstasy -- that many of us prefer to keep within private confines. That symbiosis, and our resulting catharsis, reverberates throughout performances well beyond Broadway.

This Massive Swing Drops You 196 Feet Into a Canyon



Puffs | Hunter Canning

How do I find a great show if it doesn't advertise during the The View?

Just like you'd find something to watch on Netflix, but with pants. What are in the mood for? If you're looking to LOL at excellent off-script performers and catch a glimpse of the future comedy stars of tomorrow, check out the [Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre](#), where you can see late night [TV writers](#) work out unaided bits for as little as [\\$9](#). Ready to *let go* of Disneyfied song and dance routines and make life a real-deal cabaret? You can see bonafide Broadway babies cover artists like [Kelly Clarkson](#) for around \$25 at [The Green Room 42](#). For pop culture politicos, [NEWSICAL the Musical](#), is like *The Daily Show* set to music. Nostalgic

for a certain wizarding franchise? Puffs is a lighthearted musical parody to Harry Potter and the Cursed Child -- without the two-part ticket price.

Check out Broadway World for info on new openings and New York Theater Guide for reviews of shows that general interest publications may have missed. If you want to stay as up to date as the industry pros, Broadway talent agent and playwright Megan Lohne recommends Deadline and the Broadway Briefing daily newsletter. And Did He Like It breaks down the New York Times' chief theatre critic Ben Brantley's reviews.

Here's a cheat sheet: keep an eye on The Public Theater, Playwrights Horizons, Roundabout Theatre Company, La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, MCC Theater, and New York Theatre Workshop for consistently excellent programming.



The Public Theater | [Tallmaple/Shutterstock](#)

Just how far “off” does Broadway go?

Off Off. With one exception, proper Broadway theater is concentrated in the Theater District -- bound by 40th and 57th Streets and Sixth and Eighth Avenues. (Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater is the only outlier.) Size also matters. All Broadway theaters must have at least 500 seats.

Off-Broadway refers to theaters with at least 100 -- but fewer than 500 -- seats. Off-Broadway theaters do not need to be in the Theater District, but they are typically in Manhattan. The largest concentrations of off-Broadway theaters are on the West Side and in Greenwich Village.

Off-Off-Broadway, though it may sound like a middling '90s-era joke, is also a real designation. These theaters have fewer than 100 seats, and can be anywhere in the five boroughs.

The Offs have a lot going for them, even outside of Broadway's shadow. It's thrilling to think that if you're at the right show at the right time, you might catch a piece of history. Tony award winning productions and performers do not appear out of thin air; Lin-Manuel Miranda had to start somewhere before *In the Heights* caught fire and before *Hamilton* was a smash success. You may not have been among the first to catch the “gifted young composer” Off-Broadway, but successors are always waiting in the wings.

Your presence also makes more of an impact the farther you get from Broadway. Every ticket purchased, seat filled, and Instagram Story posted is noticed and appreciated, and helps support and enable artists to continue presenting their work to the rest of us.

What other types of theater should I consider?

Let's allow, for a moment, that theater happens any time a person performs in public. Moment over, let's walk that back and say that, at minimum, it must happen on a stage, and within four walls. Neither is strictly, true, and there are very famous examples that defy both explanations. Most folks will know theater when they see it, and any exposure to the performing arts -- whatever you decide to call it -- will be entertaining, enriching, curious, or at least conversation starting.



Courtesy of 54 Below

Solo shows and cabarets

Solo shows and cabarets are excellent ways to see Broadway-quality performances in cozy, casual environments. For the price of a cover charge and occasional spending minimum, you'll see professional actors and rising stars croon showtunes or pop songs, or perform play-length original material while you eat, drink, and (quietly!) chat with friends. They're a great way to engage with musical theater and to see stars perform in a more personal setting.

“There’s a vibrant cabaret world in New York,” says Eric William Morris, who currently stars as Carl Denham in King Kong on Broadway. He loves 54 Below, a slightly pricey (the cover charge plus food and drink minimums hover around \$65 for some popular shows), renowned cabaret club located beneath former nightclub/present day Broadway theater, Studio 54. “They do 2-3 shows every night, and they’re all under 80 minutes,” he says. “They do a good job at bringing in both new and established musical theater writers.”

Maggie McDowell, who has appeared in Kinky Boots and Disaster! on Broadway, recently wrote and starred in a solo show about motherhood in showbusiness The Green Room 42.

“I was a new mom and starting to audition again; I wanted to have a night where I could just sing for fun, but also get some exposure and reintroduce myself,” she says. McDowell was also recently part of Tony-nominated actress Jennifer Simard’s solo show, which focused on mental health.

“There are a bunch of cabarets that are just for fun, where people sing fun songs,” McDowell says. “But other people have stories to tell that they might not be able to on the Broadway stage.”



The Devouring | Courtesy of House of Yes

Burlesque and circus theater

The circus has evolved mightily from the time P.T. Barnum paraded elephants across the Brooklyn Bridge. Cirque du Soleil has become a household name (and happens to have a show in Queens this month), but only scratches the surface of what's out there. New York is packed with performers who can move, bend and fly in ways that should not be humanly possible, and it's a magnificent sight to see.

House of Yes, a nightclub-cum-performance venue in Brooklyn, hosts 2-3 adult-circus-style performances each week.

“At a traditional theater, you sit down and don't talk to anyone around you. House of Yes blends these boundaries,” says co-founder Anya Sapozhnikova. “You don't know if the person you're sitting next to is a performer, and you don't know when the show technically begins. Regular theater can be predictable; we like to go beyond that whenever possible.”

The House of Yes crew recently teamed up with Studio 54's Ian Schrager to create a mind-bendingly sexy dinner cabaret called The Devouring. Located at the Paradise Club inside the The Times Square EDITION Hotel, the show includes a multi-course menu from Michelin-starred chef John Fraser.

The Slipper Room and The Box host smaller but equally dazzling extravaganzas, and underground burlesque shows occasionally pop up in the Nonsense NYC newsletter.



The Gallery Players | Steven Pisano

Community theater

Community theater tends to get a bad rap (along with community *anything*--I blame Chevy Chase), but believe it or not, it really is of the highest caliber here in NYC.

“What’s particularly great is that you get a wide variety in talent and in level of engagement,” says Paolo Perez, a music director for community theaters throughout Brooklyn. “There’s a mix of people who are participating as a stepping

stone into a fruitful theater career, and people for who it's just a hobby, but are still insanely talented.”

The Gallery Players, The Rockaway Theatre Company, Narrows Community Theater, The Heights Players, and Prospect Theater Company are great spots to check out -- and may even inspire you to get involved.

And remember: many a Broadway lead has earned their BFA in the Big Apple. Productions by conservatories like Circle in the Square and NYU Tisch showcase some of the superstars of tomorrow.



Sleep No More | Courtesy of The McKittrick Hotel

Every other type of theater you can possibly imagine

We are in the concrete jungle where dreams are made of, people. Where. Dreams. Are. Made. Of. If you want it, we've got it, and it's gonna be good.

In addition to UCB, The PIT's improv comedy will split your sides. Chamber Magic at the Lotte New York Palace will drop your draw. The McKittrick Hotel brings interactive spectacle to the theater scene, and it's marquee production Sleep No More has become a modern classic. Don't sleep on its themed pop-up performances, either; a past Clue-themed show featured Neil Patrick Harris as a surprise guest star. For lower key interaction, stop by one of The Night Shift Theatre Company's Drunken Shakespeare events -- anyone in attendance can hop on stage and give a soliloquy while sloshed.



To Kill a Mockingbird | [Slaven Vlasic/Getty Images](#)

This all sounds nice, but I really just need to score cheap Broadway tickets this one time for what I assure you are very valid reasons.

Fine. But know that “cheap” and “Broadway” don’t generally make joint appearances. If you’re ok with waiting until the day of a performance to buy tickets, most Broadway shows offer some or all of the following deals: rush, lottery, standing-room-only, and partial view tickets.

Rush tickets require you to physically rush to the box office when it opens in the morning to be one of the first people to snag one or two designated low-cost tickets. General rushes are open to everyone. Student rushes and senior rushes are self-explanatory, and you'll need an ID to prove you're either.

You can also enter a show's ticket lottery, at the theater box office and/or online. If your name is drawn, you can purchase one or two deeply discounted tickets to that day's performance.

Standing-room-only and partial view tickets are exactly what they sound like. Standing-room spots are usually behind the orchestra, where you'll catch a sweet view. Partial-view seats may leave you behind a pole or some other obstruction that interferes with your outlook on the action. You get what you pay for, after all.

Playbill has a [comprehensive guide](#) to the daily discount policies for every show currently on Broadway. [Broadway for Broke People](#) is also an excellent resource.

If you only have a couple days to work with and don't want to risk striking out on the day-of deals, buy your tickets in advance. Like airline tickets and hotel rooms, the further out you purchase your theater tickets, the more affordable they will be. [TodayTix](#) offers a lot of relatively affordable options, and it's also wise to hop on events like NYC & Company's [Broadway Week](#), which offers 2-for-1 tickets twice a year.

If you're a local and want to take advantage of as many affordable shows as possible, look into joining the [Theatre Development Fund](#), which for \$40 a year gives you instant access to mega discounts year round, or [TheaterMania's Gold Club](#), which for \$99 a year lets you reserve up to two tickets to an unlimited

number of shows and events on and Off-Broadway for \$5 a pop. There's also Audience Extras, which for \$85 a year (+ a \$30 sign-up deposit) lets you sit in on performances (when the house just wants butts in the seats) for absolutely free.

Wait! What's the difference between theater and theatre?

Oh, you noticed. Aside from the Frasier Crane-like pretension in your voice when you say the latter? Not much. "Theater" is the standard American English spelling, and "theatre" is the standard British English spelling. Since New York City is still part of the United States, "theater" is more common when referring to Broadway.

It's been said that -er refers to the building and -re refers to the craft, and you'll see that some companies (like the American Ballet Theatre) use the latter. Though hotly debated, it's mostly just a style choice. Think of it as having a Tom and a Thom in your contacts, and both are equally entertaining.