

Conference suggests ways Broadway can be better

January 29 2013, by Mark Kennedy



This Jan. 19, 2012 file photo shows billboards advertising Broadway shows in Times Square, in New York. The TEDxBroadway conference will be held Monday, Jan. 28, 2013, at the off-Broadway complex New World Stages. The one-day event is bringing together more than a dozen producers, marketers, entrepreneurs, academics, economists and artists. All will try to answer the question: "What is the best Broadway can be?" (AP Photo/Charles Sykes, file)

(AP)—A conference on how to make the Broadway experience better for theatergoers has come up with some prescriptions: Be brave in the

stories that are told onstage and embrace youth and technology.

"Broadway, I don't think, has boldly gone where it needs to," said "Star Trek" actor George Takei, riffing off his old TV show's motto. "I have a sense that Broadway hasn't entered into the 21st century."

The second TEDxBroadway conference on Monday brought together 16 speakers—producers, marketers, entrepreneurs, academics and artists—to try to answer the question: "What is the best Broadway can be?"

"We use the word 'best' because the goal of today is to go right past better all the way to the extent of what is possible, even if it seems a little bit outlandish," said co-organizer Jim McCarthy, CEO of Goldstar, a ticket retailer.

TEDx events are independently organized but inspired by the [nonprofit group](#) TED—standing for Technology, Entertainment, Design—that started in 1984 as a conference dedicated to "ideas worth spreading." Video of the Broadway event will be made available to the public.

While the health of Broadway is good, with shows yielding a record \$1.14 billion in grosses last season, some speakers noted that total attendance—12.3 million last season—hasn't kept pace, meaning Broadway isn't always attracting new customers.

Three speakers—one the sister of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg—argued that [new technology](#) means the stage experience doesn't need to be confined to the four walls of the theater and so can grow new audiences.

David Sabel, who has helped drive the National Theatre of Great Britain into the digital age, pointed out that broadcasts of his stage shows on

movie screens across the world haven't dampened demand at the box office and have actually themselves become profitable.

"I think in our business, digital is uniquely not a threat but an opportunity," he said. "What if we could open it up and invite a much greater audience in to speak with us?"

Randi Zuckerberg said the Broadway community could increase visibility by having auditions for minor parts via YouTube, have live tweeters backstage, offer crowd funding to knit people to productions, give walk-on parts for influential figures or even make the Playbills electronic.

"Why should Broadway be limited by physical space? By ticket prices? By the same shows, over and over?" she asked. "Instead of having just a small sliver of the world come to Broadway, why not bring a small piece of Broadway to the entire world?"

And Internet guru Josh Harris said producers need to open the entire process to the outside world, including video cameras backstage to capture actors getting ready and even having the orchestra pit filled with people interacting with the audience via their electronic devices.

The annual gathering centered on Broadway is the brainchild of three men: McCarthy; Ken Davenport, a writer and producer; and Damian Bazadona, the founder of Situation Interactive. It drew 400 people to the off-Broadway complex New World Stages and into the theater where "Avenue Q" usually plays.

Takei in the past few years has grown 3.3 million Facebook friends and leveraged them into audience members to "Allegiance," his new musical about Japanese-Americans during World War II,

"If I can do it, Broadway certainly can," the 65-year-old said. "Broadway is at its best when it embraces all of the technological advancements of the time and starts making a lot of friends on social media. Then, as we say on '[Star Trek](#),' Broadway will live long and prosper."

Thomas Schumacher, the president of the Disney Theatrical Group, slammed the pretentious way some in the theatrical community look at more mainstream shows and scoffed at their disdain for making the audience experience more fun.

"Populism has its own manifest destiny and we need to embrace that," said Schumacher, who called for a big tent of theatrical options on Broadway and especially shows for children who will return as adults. "What I ask you to do is embrace this audience and maybe even embrace the sippy cup."

Terry Teachout, drama critic at The Wall Street Journal, soberly pointed out that 75 percent of all Broadway shows fail and then asked that more producers roll the dice on quality.

"If you can't count on getting rich, then forget playing it safe. Why not take a shot at being great?" he asked. "If there's ever a time for you to shoot high, this is it. Don't start out settling for safe. Gamble on great."

Kristoffer Diaz, the playwright of the Pulitzer Prize finalist "The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity," urged producers to embrace different voices, as they did with "In the Heights" and "Rent."

"Women, writers of color, transgender, lesbian, gay and bisexual—we need to keep hearing these stories. We need to hear them on Broadway," he said. "It becomes a lot harder to dismiss somebody out of hand if you've spent a couple of hours investing in their story."

Two speakers with specialty knowledge outside Broadway urged the community to not just focus on putting on a great show.

Susan Reilly Salgado, who has worked with famed restaurant owner Danny Meyer, said his success is not only about creating tasty dishes. Meyer, she said, makes the whole evening fun.

"To say that, in a restaurant, it's all about the food discounts everyone else who touches the customer experience," she said. "The best way to get people to come back to you over and over is to create an all-encompassing experience."

Erin Hoover, vice president of design for Westin and Sheraton Hotels & Resorts, said Broadway theaters could take a page out of the innovations brought to hotel lobbies, which are now comfortable, inviting and offer new sources of revenue. "The experience for the show really starts at the door."

Customer service was also a theme touched on by Zachary A. Schmahl, an actor-turned-baker who created Schmackary's Cookies in his apartment and has watched it grow into a thriving business.

"Customer service is something that people are missing in New York," he said. "It's so important in our single-serving culture to be that business that has a heart and a soul alongside a quality product."

One returning speaker was Vincent Gassetto, the principal of a high-performing public middle school in a tough area of the Bronx, who urged those in attendance to make sure Broadway was on the radar of his best and brightest students.

"It's in everybody in this room's best interest that they have an awareness of this industry or we're never going to win that talent war," he said.

"We're all going to be competing for them."

Though the speakers came from different backgrounds and emphasized different prescriptions, they did seem to agree with Daryl Roth, the Pulitzer Prize-winning producer of seven plays, including "Clybourne Park." She challenged the crowd to think of Broadway in more than just dollars and cents.

"If we share the deep belief that theater matters, that theater can change us and ultimately change the world, then isn't that the best Broadway can be?" Roth asked.

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