

Demographics track where theatergoers are going

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One of the best inside-Broadway jokes in "The Producers" involved demographics, not ordinarily a hilarious subject. Mel Brooks, that devil, made outrageous nonstop fun of the three groups generally believed to be the core of the theatergoing audience -- mature women, gays and Jews. The 2001 smash musical won 12 Tony Awards, still the most ever, so I guess no one was insulted.

Four years later, the scamps behind "Monty Python's Spamalot" were even more direct in their comic ethnology when Sir Robin warned King Arthur, "You Won't Succeed on Broadway (If You Don't Have Any Jews)." I never heard any dismay at the time, but just last summer, the guardians of the Muny Theatre in St. Louis protected -- I don't know, someone -- by changing "Jews" to "stars."

By the time Neil Patrick Harris hosted the 2011 Tony Awards, he could delightfully joke to a national audience in his opening song that Broadway's reach was so broad that -- hey, look at this -- it's "not just for gays anymore."

So, with the possible exception of a city in Missouri, nobody seems upset about the generally observed -- but not scientifically proven -- belief that Broadway, traditionally, has owed its stability to these groups of theater lovers.

In fact, this is changing. George Wachtel, president of Audience Research & Analysis and veteran Broadway demographer, tells me, "The audience is much more diverse than what we used to call our traditional audience." These were people who cared deeply about new plays and, as he puts it, "wanted to see the latest of everything." He finds that audience more at nonprofit theaters than on Broadway these days.

"People are coming to New York from all over the country and the world," he continues. "And they want to see a Broadway show. This is a much more segmented audience and more dispassionate about the theater. Broadway has become as iconic as Disneyland," a reference he doesn't intend as pejorative.

Meanwhile, as we have recently seen, some producers are mining for new audiences in untapped places. In the spring, the elusive straight-guy market was targeted with "Rocky," the big-budget musical version of Sylvester Stallone's boxing-movie franchise. Last week, we learned that "Rocky" will close Aug. 17. And "Holler If Ya Hear Me," a major reach for the urban and black youth audience with a musical inspired by the lyrics and music of the late hip-hop icon Tupac Shakur, will close today after only 38 performances and 17 previews.

Last year, men constituted just 32 percent of the Broadway audience -- down 10 percent since 1980 -- and it's unlikely that "Rocky" will budge the needle much. Facing mixed reviews (except for an attention-getting 20-minute boxing finale), the show played to a little more than half capacity after opening and is hovering between 60 and 70 percent at the start of peak summer-tourist time.

And advertising campaigns have seemed confused about whether to appeal to women with the love story or men with the action. Nor is "Rocky" alone in finding men resistant to theater. "Bronx Bombers," about Yankees history, closed fast last season, as did other recent sports plays.

The producers of the \$8 million "Holler" hit a wall trying to target both their new hip-hop audience and regular Broadway theatergoers. Despite big audiences for such black hits as "A Raisin in the Sun" and "Motown," the Broadway League's most recent demographics report (2012-2013 season) says "Caucasian theatergoers" account for 78 percent of the audience -- the same as last year.

For Eric Gold and Jessica Green, first-time Broadway producers of "Holler," the show's weak box office has been a shocker. Although box-office grosses have inched up since the early low of 39.9 percent of capacity, Gold laments he could not keep the show open long enough "to give it time to bloom on Broadway."

"I had no idea it would be this difficult," Gold told me in a recent interview with both producers. He described early losses as "huge. ... Hip-hop and New York City? How could this miss?"

They also have director Kenny Leon, fresh off his Tony win for "Raisin," a cast of theater veterans and newcomers and the Tupac musical brand. As Green accurately put it, "Hip-hop isn't a niche form. It is a part of the culture."

Gold first looked at the demographics. "The average theatergoer is 42.5 years old, female, somewhat affluent, somewhat educated, leaning liberal. And hip-hop is aging, too. Tupac had a tremendous female following in the suburbs and internationally. So Broadway's coming down and hip-hop's coming up."

Yes, but the show opened cold in June, with no out-of-town tryouts and little time to get noticed in the din of Tony time. Reviews were mostly tepid. I was on vacation for the opening and have not yet seen the show. In his review, *Newsday's* pop music critic Glenn Gamboa admired the musical's "outsized" ambitions and "stellar" performances more than the original story (inspired by Tupac's lyrics but not a biography).

The producers believe in the show and fear audiences stayed away because of "deeper issues than we consciously understand. ... The hip-hop audiences don't feel invited to Broadway. They feel the music will be sanitized."

In the show's first ad campaign, response from Broadway insiders was that it was "too much Tupac," while the hip-hop community said "not enough Tupac."

Earlier this month, producers tried a far more provocative ad campaign. "Most critics are scared of this show ... they should be," read fliers in the black community. On tour buses, the aim was to clarify the show, which was not a jukebox musical but a new dark but uplifting drama about the struggles of young urban blacks.

No one will ever know whether this two-headed, possibly contradictory outreach could have changed the future.

OK. But how are we to explain the mystery of the vanishing "Bridges of Madison County"? This one is another heartache.

The musical was based on a bestselling bodice-ripping romance novel and a hit movie about an impossible love between a dashing traveling photographer and the Italian émigré wife of an Iowa farmer. Kelli O'Hara and Stephen Pasquale were exquisite. Jason Robert Brown's score, which won a Tony, had some of the most luscious and intelligent music I've heard on Broadway in a long time. The book was too busy and conventional for the intimate love story, but Bartlett Sher's production was beautiful. The worst I could say about "Bridges" was that it was a guilty-pleasure trashy novel encrusted in gold binding.

But the show, however flawed, didn't even get a Tony nomination among far lesser musicals, and folded before Tony time.

So if, as reported in the Broadway League study, women constitute a mind-boggling 68 percent of the audience, shouldn't this female-driven romance have reached the same women who devoured the novel and the movie?

Jeffrey Richards, producer of "Bridges," has his theory. "This show affirmed adultery while reaffirming family values," he told me. "That's a built-in problem and tricky territory for a musical. If a woman brings her husband to the show, won't he wonder at intermission what she's trying to tell him? The core audience for musicals is basically family."

Really? Is there no room on Broadway for the restless woman?

Wachtel said the only thing that makes sense to me about producing with demographics in mind: "You can't assume that, just because you're appealing to a new audience, you're going to be successful."

Or, as Gold responded when I described the whole subject as fascinating, "My gastroenterologist is fascinated, too."