

LIGHTS ON... BROADWAY!

RESOURCE TOOLKIT FOR AMERICAN SPACES

This Resource Toolkit is part of the Americana series, designed to showcase unique elements of regional U.S. culture through programming at American Spaces. This toolkit provides information to educate audiences about the history and cultural significance of Broadway theater in New York City.



TONY AWARDS

The Tony Awards have recognized the best in Broadway theater since 1947. Awards are given in categories like acting, directing, musical score, choreography, writing, lighting, and design, with Best Musical and Best Play designating the top shows of the year.

With 21 wins, Harold Prince received the most Tony awards of anyone in history for his work on *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Company*, and more. For a single production, *Hamilton* holds the record for the most nominations (16). *The Producers* has received the most total awards (12).

WHAT IS BROADWAY?

Located in New York City, the Broadway theater district is home to some of the most famous and acclaimed theatrical performances in the world. Only a handful of the approximately 40 theaters that make up Broadway actually reside on the street for which the district is named, but the Broadway community's influence is felt around the world.

Though the first theater in New York City opened in 1732, Broadway truly became a staple of American culture in the twentieth century. Plays and musical theater continued to flourish even as cinema emerged as a competitor, with wealthy investors and visionary artists flocking to New York. To this day, Broadway remains a popular destination for locals and tourists. Smaller "Off-Broadway" productions also attract large audiences with innovative and nuanced stories.



VIDEOS

Broadway 101

This video from Playbill provides a quick rundown of what it means to be a Broadway theater.

Hamilton at the White House

Lin-Manuel Miranda and Christopher Jackson perform "One Last Time," a song about George Washington's decision to step down from the presidency, at the White House.

West Side Story Dance Sequence

This number from the 2021 film version of *West Side Story* demonstrates racial divides through dance.

CASTING A Raisin in the Sun

This video recounts the casting of Lorraine Hansberry's revolutionary *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first play produced by a Black woman on Broadway.

Why Theater is Important

This short video from the cast of *The Prom* explains how theater can impact young people.

Inside Broadway's Secret Laboratory

This video from *The New York Times* provides a fascinating peek behind the Broadway stage.

The Lasting Impact of Our Town

This video from CBS breaks down to continuing relevance and importance of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, America's most-produced play.



Photo courtesy of Playbill.

THEATER AS A SOCIAL FORCE

As long as Broadway has existed, it has served as a platform for stories that reflect a changing world:

- Eugene O'Neill's realistic dramas spoke to the challenges of American life between the two World Wars.
- Tony Kushner's seven-hour epic *Angels in America*, which came to Broadway in 1993, examines the AIDS epidemic.
- More recently, Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* reinterpreted the creating of America with hip-hop music and a diverse cast portraying the Founding Fathers.

Storytellers from various backgrounds have also fostered artistic communities and found success on Broadway and beyond:

- Since 1977, New York's Pan Asian Repertory Theatre has showcased works by and starring Asian American artists.
- The American Negro Theatre, which was active in New York from 1940 to 1951, helped launch the careers of such actors as Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, and Ruby Dee.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why do you think artists from different backgrounds formed their own performance spaces? Why is that important?
- Why do you think Broadway—and theater more generally—are still popular when so much content is available online?
- How can plays that are decades old still matter to us today?
- What makes theater different from other art forms like music and movies?
- After watching the clip from *Hamilton*, how do you think presenting American history through modern music changes the message?