

Broadway musicians strike over “canned” music threat

Bill Vann
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A strike by over 325 Broadway musical orchestra members left 20 theaters dark in New York City Friday, as actors and stagehands voted to honor the musicians’ picket lines.

A bitter dispute has erupted between the musicians and the League of American Theatres and Producers over the issue of minimums—the size of the orchestras required for Broadway shows.

Musicians charge that the producers are engaged in a union-busting campaign aimed at squeezing out a greater profit margin by drastically reducing or even eliminating live music on Broadway and replacing it with digitally prerecorded or synthesized sound.

Union rules that have existed for over half a century establish minimum numbers of musicians that range from as low as three to nine for the smaller theaters up to 24 or 26 for the larger ones. The producers have demanded the scrapping of these standards, hypocritically claiming that they interfere with “artistic discretion” and amount to “featherbedding,” forcing them to hire more musicians than are needed.

In reality, for the past decade the union, American Federation of Musicians Local 802, has agreed to submit producers’ requests for smaller musical contingents to a standing committee made up of two representative each from labor and management and three people drawn from a mutually agreed-upon list of music composers and directors. Out of 20 requests made, the committee approved 17. In the remaining three cases, producers ignored the panel’s ruling and went ahead with smaller numbers of musicians anyway.

Among the shows granted exemptions are “Aida,” “Chicago,” “Mama Mia,” “Movin’ Out,” “Smokey Joe’s Café,” and “Urban Cowboy.”

Music directors and composers who make the artistic decisions have strongly backed the musician union’s

minimums as a curb on the producers’ drive to slash music budgets in the interest of profit. More than 40 prominent musical creators signed a petition recently opposing the producers’ demand. They included John Kander, the composer of “Chicago” and “Cabaret,” and Don Sebesky, the orchestrator for “Kiss Me Kate” and other Broadway shows.

In the final analysis, the conflict pits musicians fighting to save their jobs and defend the quality of their performances against producers seeking to deliver a greater payoff to themselves and their investors. To pursue its aims, management has brought in a law firm that is well known for organizing union-busting drives.

Negotiations between the union and the producers continued Friday, with management offering to settle for lower minimums, first proposing 7 and then 14. A union spokesman rejected the offer, stating, “Fourteen does not an orchestra make.”

Outside the Marquis Theater on Broadway Friday, orchestra members from the musical “Thoroughly Modern Millie” picketed just across the street from Manhattan’s main discount ticket outlet. They were joined by a group of younger tourists who voiced support for the strike and chanted with the strikers, “Save live music on Broadway.”

“They want to replace us with the virtual orchestra, a couple of synthesizers and computer-generated sound,” said Dan Willis, a saxophonist with the orchestra. “What this amounts to is killing the kind of live performance that makes Broadway great.”

He noted that the producers held rehearsals with the “canned” music system recently in a bid to intimidate the musicians. Actors’ Equity, which represents Broadway actors, called for a halt to the rehearsals, but the producers responded with the threat of a court injunction. “People who heard it said it sounded

terrible,” said Dan. The staging of the rehearsals was what prompted Local 802 to take a strike vote.

“There is a give-and-take between what happens on stage and what happens in the orchestra pit,” he added. “This would basically turn it into karaoke, but the producers are just betting that the audience won’t notice the difference.”

Ray Kilday, the orchestra’s bassist, said he was amazed at the producers’ greed, given that Broadway is already making record profits this year. “Thoroughly Modern Millie,” he said, is grossing around \$800,000 a week.

“They spend such a small percentage of their costs on music, but they figure that that’s a percentage more that they can turn into profits,” he said. The union estimates that just \$6 out of every \$100 full-price Broadway ticket goes to pay for music, including not only the musicians, but the composers as well.

“How can you call it musical theater without musicians?” asked Ray. “You can set a tape and run it for two hours. It will start and finish at the right times, but what happens in between matters.”



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