

Previews for “Spider-Man” musical in New York produce a rash of injuries

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In the latest of a series of accidents and resulting injuries that have plagued the forthcoming musical “Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark,” now in previews at New York City’s Foxwoods Theatre, a 31-year-old actor was hurt at an evening performance December 20, when he fell more than 20 feet into the pit just a few minutes before the scheduled end of the show.

Christopher Tierney, one of several performers who play the superhero Spider-Man during stunts in the Broadway production, was rushed to Bellevue Hospital where medical personnel found he had sustained, according to the *New York Times*, “a hairline fracture in his skull, a broken scapula, a broken bone close to his elbow, four broken ribs, a bruised lung and three fractured vertebrae.” He underwent back surgery December 22.

Tierney’s father, Timothy, told the *Times* that if his son had not tucked his body in mid-air and landed on his right side, the results could have been much worse. “My understanding is that Chris is fortunate to be alive,” Timothy Tierney explained. The younger Tierney remains in the intensive care unit.

This most recent incident is the fourth resulting in injury since “Spider-Man” previews began November 28. One actor suffered a concussion and another broke both wrists. The performer who suffered the head injury in the very first preview, Natalie Mendoza, a lead actress in the show, is apparently leaving “Spider-Man,” the *Times* reported December 28, in “an artistic loss and embarrassing blow to the production.” She was shaken, according to individuals who work on the show, by both her own accident and Tierney’s.

The musical’s opening has now been postponed from January 11 to February 7, in light of safety concerns and for “creative changes.” The show will have gone through a record number of previews, the product of

increasing nervousness over its financial success, as well as the attention attracted by the spate of injuries.

Two performances were cancelled after the December 20 incident, while the New York State Department of Labor—which must approve all public performances—conferred with the show’s producers and technical team, along with the Actors Equity Association. Later in the week, state officials pronounced themselves satisfied with additional safety precautions, and performances resumed.

“Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark” is the Broadway incarnation of the famous comic book superhero first created almost fifty years ago. The three *Spider-Man* films released over the past decade have grossed more than \$2.5 billion worldwide. Well-known theater and opera director Julie Taymor has been working for years on the Broadway production, with music supplied by Bono and The Edge of U2. With an unprecedented initial investment of \$65 million, the musical’s cost dwarfs that of its closest rival in terms of expense, “Shrek: The Musical,” which cost \$25 million and ran for about 13 months after opening two years ago.

The “Spider-Man” saga illustrates the enormous financial pressures bearing down on Broadway and driving it to copy the extreme commercialism and special effects that have become a major focus of Hollywood.

The site-specific character of a theater production makes the latter unlike a movie extravaganza, which can be screened worldwide with ease. Even tours of “Spider-Man” to major cities may be sharply limited because of its technical requirements, which include the use of stuntmen and dozens of aerial maneuvers, such as the one that led to the injury last week.

In addition, there is the expense of putting on eight live shows a week. “Spider-Man” is expected to cost at

least \$1,000,000 weekly, in addition to the initial investment. The show may have to play to full houses for years to recoup these original costs.

Despite this, “Spider-Man” producers apparently had little difficulty in attracting investors. The musical arrives with film box office success behind it, and the production also holds the promise of marketing and commercial tie-ins on a massive scale.

The high production costs and narrow profit margins, however, add to the pressure to build up the show as the very latest in special effects wizardry. The media attention given to the production with each additional injury and technical problem has been almost frenzied. Some news accounts last week speculated that audiences might be swelled by those attracted to the circus-like atmosphere and the risk of further injuries.

What stands out in all this is the increasing financialization of the entertainment industry, which today is usually covered by the media as financial news and not as a portion of the performing arts. Both the safety of the performers and the actual content of a given show take a distant second place to commercial success and returns on investment.

New York’s billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, in a statement issued after the latest injury, expressed this focus on profits and special effects vulgarity, reassuring the public that “hopefully they’ll get all the bugs out. I’m told it’s incredibly complex, which is one of the reasons it’s going to be such a great show.”

The contrast with the Broadway of 40 and 50 years ago is a stark one. New York theater played a distinctly different role in the postwar period. In the first place, Broadway was home to serious or semi-serious drama in the 1950s and 1960s, including the efforts of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*) and others.

Another mainstay, the musical theater, based its appeal on relatively broad themes, notwithstanding its sometime sentimentality and formulaic approach. Shows such as “South Pacific” and others by Rodgers and Hammerstein addressed themselves to social and historical matters. The New York theater was also somewhat insulated from the crudest commercial pressures of the period that found expression in the studio film industry, and that was a factor in its role as a haven for some of those who were victimized by the McCarthy era blacklist.

The “Spider-Man” phenomenon indicates how much has changed in the past generation, with the use of bombast and special effects to create spectacles devoid for the most part of real content and creativity.



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