

ON BROADWAY

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT (OREN JACOBY)

When we were interviewing Helen Mirren for ON BROADWAY, she suddenly questioned the very idea of people sitting together in a dark room to watch a story being told. “It’s ridiculous, when you think about it. I mean...what a weird thing to do.” Somehow, after months and months without live performances of any kind, the idea doesn’t seem all that weird. A life-long New Yorker, I’m one of the weirdos who have been mesmerized over the years by actors like Mirren baring their souls on a Broadway stage and helping to make Times Square one of the most popular destinations in the world. All of that suddenly came to a halt on March 13, 2020, when Broadway, like the rest of the world, was forced to shut down by the pandemic. For eighteen months, all 41 Broadway theaters have been dark and life in NYC has, in many ways, been “on hold”. Every year, for decades, millions of people traveled thousands of miles and spent billions of dollars to come to one tiny neighborhood along a street called Broadway, just to sit in the dark and watch a show. Last year, suddenly, that flow of people, the lifeblood of every great city, just stopped.

Now that Broadway is poised to return, our documentary tells the story of its survival over the past 50 years. Back in the 1970s, when I was growing up in Manhattan, there was another moment when this whole thing almost came to an end. Broadway was on the verge of bankruptcy; there was talk of tearing down all the theaters and replacing them with parking lots. The plays seemed old fashioned, the Broadway audience had declined more than 50% in 5 years, most theaters were sitting dark, so theater owners couldn’t pay their bills, and the neighborhood was so scary that the police department was warning people to stay away after sundown. As a lifelong New Yorker, I was drawn to the surprising story of how an industry and an art form on the verge of extinction, not only avoided collapse, but managed to reinvent itself and come back stronger, in astonishing ways. Today, after an even more devastating crisis, I realize that the story of that comeback can show us all a way forward.

Making ON BROADWAY, I was given an extraordinary chance to meet and interview actors, directors, producers and playwrights who are the heart and soul of the American Theater. They tell the inside story of the remarkable changes that they helped initiate or witnessed over the past 50 years – a transformation that turned Broadway around. They track the breakthrough works and the artists who have made Broadway into a venue where you can find everything from the experimental and iconoclastic to the mainstream and commercial. More important, they tell how from the 70s onward Broadway started to more accurately reflect the diverse, complicated society in which we actually live. Despite the fact that it is constantly changing, Broadway somehow continues to attract the most passionately loyal and devoted fans in the world. As Ian McKellen says, trying to describe the force of Broadway pulling us all in... “Come on, come in, come here... I’m going to give myself to you and you’re going to come and love me...”