

BROADWAY  
AND BEYOND

**MODERN  
MUSICALS  
IN CONTEXT**



THE  
**NATIONAL THEATRE**  
FOUNDATION



For almost 200 years, The National Theatre has occupied a prominent position on Pennsylvania Avenue—“America’s Main Street”—and played a central role in the cultural and civic life of Washington, DC. Located a stone’s throw from the White House and having the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site as its “front yard,” The National Theatre is a historic, cultural presence in our Nation’s Capital and the oldest continuously operating enterprise on Pennsylvania Avenue. The non-profit National Theatre Foundation oversees the historic theatre and serves the DC community through three free outreach programs, *Saturday Morning Live!*, *Community Stage Connections*, and *Teens Behind the Scenes*. These programs provide the greater Washington area with access to high quality performing arts experiences while promoting and employing local and regional artists.

This guide was created for the *Teens Behind the Scenes* program. *Teens Behind the Scenes* is made possible thanks to the generosity of the Jacqueline Badger Mars Next Generation Fund at The National Theatre. Established by Jacqueline Badger Mars in 2022, the fund provides leadership support for The National Theatre Foundation’s signature community programs and seeks to inspire future theatre artists and appreciators onstage, behind the scenes, and in the audience.

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In this supplemental study guide, you'll get a broad overview of musical theatre history, a look at how representations of disabled characters have evolved since the mid-20th century, and some insight into how a touring production operates. Keep an eye out for fun facts and a chance to show off your own analytical skills!

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# KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

We are excited to welcome you to The National Theatre through The National Theatre Foundation's Teens Behind the Scenes program! Whether you're a new theatre-goer or a seasoned veteran, here are a few things to bear in mind.

## WHAT WILL I BE SEEING?

The National Theatre has hosted many memorable productions. These days, the shows you are most likely to see here are national tours, many of which are derived from current or recent Broadway productions. In those cases, the touring version uses the same script, musical score, choreography, and direction as the Broadway original, while the production elements, such as the set and costumes, have been adapted so they can be transported across the country. The actors onstage are also traveling all over the country, often for a year at a time. In other words, the show you see in Washington, DC is the same show that folks in places like Seattle, Dallas, and Chicago will see, too. In addition to national tours, you may also see the occasional pre-Broadway tryout. This is when producers debut a show in a major city outside of New York to see how it plays in front of a paying audience, before making the jump to Broadway.

## HOW CAN I MAXIMIZE MY EXPERIENCE?

Thankfully, going to the theatre is a much more relaxed and inclusive experience than it used to be. However, there are still expectations for what makes a good theatre-going experience for everyone. Here are some tips for getting the most out of your experience.

- **Arrive early and let the staff help you get settled.**  
This gives you time to grab refreshments and use the restroom. If you are late and the show has already started, you may have to wait to be seated. Keep an eye out for the ushers: they are to help you.
- **Respect the space and your fellow audience members.**  
Consume any food and drink you bring into the auditorium carefully. Keep the aisles and rows clear by putting your belongings under your seat. Be mindful of your neighbor's personal bubble. If you must talk during a performance, keep it to a whisper or briefly share your thoughts during laughter or applause.
- **Take a break from your screen.** Cellphones and tablets shine brightly in the dark and their noises can distract from the experience. Be sure to silence your devices and put them away, or better yet, turn them off. An exception is a closed captioning app like GalaPro, which you can use on your device.
- **Show your appreciation.** Performers can tell if you are tuned into the show, so if you enjoyed the big musical number, applaud and cheer! If something shocks or surprises you, gasp! Laugh if the moment calls for it; nothing kills a comedy like a quiet auditorium! While courtesy is important, it shouldn't stop you from having a good time.

Know that downright disruptive behavior, such as excessive talking, prolonged use of phones and devices, or any form of abuse, will not be tolerated. When in doubt, consult with members of the house staff and heed their instructions: they are in charge during the show.

More than anything, we want you to know that we're glad you're here.  
Enjoy your experience at The National Theatre!

# GO BEHIND THE SCENES WITH OUR TBTS WEBINAR SERIES

The TBTS Webinar series is a collection of interviews with emerging and leading theatre professionals, each conducted by one of our TBTS Dramaturgs. The artists share their pathways into the profession, what their creative process entails, and what young artists like yourself can learn from their experience. Check out this summer's offerings, featuring the artistic director of one of America's leading regional theatres, a prolific actor and teacher, a Tony-nominated lighting designer, a New York-based stage manager, a composer and music director, and a professor and leading access specialist!



The National Theatre Foundation presents

**BEHIND THE SCENES OF MUSIC DIRECTION**  
featuring Kristin Stowell



Interviewed by Lindsey R. Barr  
in June 2024



The National Theatre Foundation presents

**BEHIND THE SCENES OF STAGE MANAGEMENT**  
featuring Maria De Barros



Interviewed by Lindsey R. Barr  
in June 2024



The National Theatre Foundation presents

**BEHIND THE SCENES OF LIGHTING DESIGN**  
featuring Amith Chandrashaker



Interviewed by Leayne Dempsey  
in June 2024



The National Theatre Foundation presents

**BEHIND THE SCENES OF DRAMATURGY**  
featuring Samuel Yates



Interviewed by Leayne Dempsey  
in July 2024



The National Theatre Foundation presents

**BEHIND THE SCENES OF ACTING**  
featuring Ro Boddie



Interviewed by Leayne Dempsey  
in July 2024



The National Theatre Foundation presents

**BEHIND THE SCENES OF ARTISTIC DIRECTION**  
featuring Hana S. Sharif



Interviewed by Lindsey R. Barr  
in August 2024





# DISABILITY IN MUSICAL THEATRE

## A MODERN OVERVIEW

### What does “freak show” mean in this context?

“Freak show” is a term used to describe the exhibition of exotic or deformed animals as well as humans considered to be in some way abnormal or outside broadly accepted norms. Although the collection and display of such so-called “freaks” has a long history, the term freak show refers to an arguably distinct American phenomenon that can be dated to the early 1800s.

Representations of disability in musical theatre have historically mirrored society’s evolving attitudes toward disabled people in general. Frequent use of disability as a narrative tool for marginalization and spectacle has increasingly given way to centering disabled characters, creating opportunities for disabled artists, and a move toward more inclusion and authentic representations of the disabled experience on stage.

Though representations of disability have been theatricalized throughout the history of musical theatre, by the mid-20th century, musicals like *The Who’s Tommy* (1969) began to center disability through storytelling. Tommy, a boy rendered deaf, blind, and mute after trauma, becomes a spiritual figure and cultural phenomenon. His character blends psychological trauma with physical disability, reflecting a growing cultural fascination with difference that was nevertheless still rooted in the trope of the “inspirational” disabled person. Similarly, narratives like these risked romanticizing disability without challenging societal prejudice.

In the late 20th century, musicals such as *Side Show* (1997) offered more humanizing portrayals. Based on the lives of real conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton, the musical explored the emotional depth and humanity of disabled people beyond the “freak-show” trope that permeated the 19th century. It questioned public voyeurism and

focused on themes of identity and love. This period marked a turning point, with writers starting to see disability not as a gimmick but as a lens through which to explore universal human experiences.

Entering the 21st century, musicals like *Next to Normal* (2008) and *Dear Evan Hansen* (2015) took on mental illness and neurodiversity directly. *Next to Normal* follows a mother with bipolar disorder and its effects on her family, portraying mental health challenges with emotional intensity and complexity. *Dear Evan Hansen*, focusing on anxiety and depression in a high school student, sparked both acclaim and



Alice Ripley with Aaron Tveit, left, and J. Robert Spencer last year in the musical *Next to Normal*, about mental illness.