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It's a tradition for me to share with friends a diary of my New York visits, especially my theater-going. This is a long piece.

In mid-August, I received an email from Peter Alessandria, an amazing photographer starting his first film, a documentary, *What Every Soul Knows: The Secret to Remembering Who We Really Are*, fueled by his interest in near death experiences, *A Course in Miracles*, and so forth. He invited me to be interviewed for it. He's doing all the interviews in person in front of a green screen with professional lighting, etc., so this meant a trip to his home in Dover, New Jersey.

Before Covid, my longest gap between trips to New York City to see theater and friends had been three years, but it had been over five and a half, so it was a good excuse to visit and catch up with friends and theater, a big passion of mine.

I rented an AirBNB-type room from a friend of a friend on West 99th Street (between Riverside Drive and West End Avenue) and arrived Wednesday, Sept. 27. I rested and got settled on Thursday, and then Friday, took the train to Dover. It was crazy timing, since that was the day of unprecedented rain and flooding. The subways were not running, so I had to pay \$80 for an Uber to go sixty blocks. Then, I missed the train I'd planned on because I had naively assumed that the PATH train was the same as New Jersey Transit. Peter was cool and I took a train an hour later.

The interview went well. There were over thirty-five questions, and it took over three hours. If all goes as planned, the movie will be ready in early 2025. I announce any news like this via my *Perspectives* newsletter. You can sign up on any page of my site: <https://shepherdhoodwin.com>.

On Saturday, I met a friend for my first show, *Moulin Rouge*. I had admired the movie but it was too nonstop loud and busy for me. The musical was less so. It followed the same pattern of repurposing pop songs, but many were different ones. Maybe they couldn't get the rights to the original ones. Its run started four years ago, so the original leads have moved on. The staging, sets, etc. were

impressive, but I didn't feel that the two romantic leads had much chemistry, although they have strong voices. The best actor played the heavy, who was more evil than in the movie, almost cartoonishly so. There's often a little suspension of disbelief required in musicals, but there just wasn't enough that rang true for me to get behind this one.

Theaters are often kept cool so that the actors don't sweat under the lights, but several of the theaters during this trip were unbearably cold. I kept my winter coat on through both shows on Saturday and was not too warm. But on Sunday, NYC had a welcome heat wave and I didn't want to shlep my big coat, so I just wore a sweater and a yarn cap, which kept me warm enough.

Incidentally, we had some beautiful weather after the rain, but now it's getting cool and rainy again.

Also, there's been an increasing trend of the music being way overamplified. It seems that directors believe that the audience won't like it unless it's as loud as a rock concert. My friend gave me a bunch of light foam earplugs, which I put in for the loudest moments. I had to walk out at intermission for *Rocky Horror Picture Show* a few years ago because the volume was too painful for me. In the old days, there was no amplification—actors had to project. I like some amplification, but many shows are overshooting the sweet spot.

Another change: more theaters are banning late seating. There's no mercy for people who are late for circumstances beyond their control. (If there's an intermission, they can be seated then.)

Okay, now the theater news gets better.

I met another friend for dinner at a Japanese restaurant with an unusual menu, and then we saw *Some Like It Hot*. I expected to find it dumb. It's been a long time since I saw the movie with Tony Curtis, Jack Lemmon, and Marilyn Monroe, but at least at the time, it wasn't my thing. But the Broadway version got a lot of great reviews (as did *Moulin Rouge* and most others I saw or am going to see). I was pleasantly surprised. It's also not all that believable—none of the female musicians noticed the pretenders having Adam's apples? But I found it joyous. Some of the singers were sensational, and there was nonstop dancing where

everyone seemed to be having a marvelous time. An understudy was in for the Best Actor Tony Award winner (the first out nonbinary person to win it). It's always nice to see the originators of a role, especially the award winners, but I liked the understudy.

For the Sunday matinee, I went to one of my must-sees, *Kimberly Akimbo*, starring Victoria Clark, who has one of the most beautiful voices on Broadway and is a terrific actor. She won the Tony Award for Best Actress both for this and for one of my all-time favorites, *Light in the Piazza*. A couple of my theater-loving friends had some issues with *Kimberly Akimbo*, but I thought it was enchanting and well-nigh perfect. The play it was based on had its premier near me in Costa Mesa, California, in 2001, and was blown away then with its originality and sweetness. The playwright also wrote the lyrics and script for the musical.

For the evening show, I went to *Purlie Victorious* with Leslie Odom, Jr. It's a revival of a 1961 play written by Ossie Davis and originally starring him and his wife Ruby Dee. At the time, Eleanor Roosevelt said that every American should see it and what it shows about racism. It was later made into a musical, *Purlie*, but the play had never been revived before. It was riotously funny, moving, and beautifully acted. Three thumbs up!

So far, I bought tickets for all these shows at the TKTS half-price ticket book in Times Square, for about \$100 each. People have been complaining for the whole time I've been seeing theater in New York City about the high price of theater tickets but it has really gotten shocking, far outpacing inflation. For sold-out hits, orchestra seats can be over \$600. I think this began with *Hamilton* in 2015. Scalpers were gaming the system, buying up vast swaths of tickets and reselling them for even thousands of dollars, so the producers decided to sell the best tickets themselves at almost scalper prices. I paid full-price for one of the tickets because I knew it wouldn't be available otherwise, and it was a cheap seat for over \$200! However, so far, I've lucked out and had mostly good seats; all the TKTS seats were close in the orchestra. A couple were restricted view from being far off to the side, but nothing egregious.

On Sunday, there was the annual Broadway flea market to raise money for a nonprofit. There were dozens of tables fanning out from Shubert Alley onto 44th and 45th Streets, some run by the cast of Broadway shows, some by organizations

such as the Dramatists Guild. They had a silent auction (also online); I heard a rare Playbill go for \$1000. But the merchandise at the tables was cheap, with CDs, records, Playbills, posters, mugs, buttons, etc. often for a dollar or two. When they were closing up shop at 6 p.m., one table just gave away everything for free, and after that, there were boxes of merchandise put out for garbage pickup from other booths that people were picking through. I normally try not to accumulate more stuff, but I ended up with twenty-two CDs, two mugs, and the Dramatists Guild's magazine's special commemorative Sondheim edition edited by Lin-Manuel Miranda, which I'm loving (\$1). I also got a unique boxed set of extended-play 45s from the 1950s (which I'd never seen or heard of before) of the Rodgers and Hart musical *On Your Toes*, with Elaine Stritch, which I am looking forward to hearing—I loved the show when I saw it on my first NYC theater-going trip in 1983.

I had some cool synchronicities when striking up conversations with fellow theater lovers sitting near or behind me. On Sunday night, I overheard someone say that he had tickets to the three Sondheim musicals on the same nights in the same order as I did. Then, wouldn't you know it! on Wednesday night at *Sweeney Todd*, he was again sitting right behind me! What are the chances?

Then, on Thursday night (at *Here We Are*), I overheard people behind me talking about *Sweeney Todd*. Unfortunately, Josh Groban was out when I saw it (perhaps ill again—he'd had Covid) so there were understudies. Josh's understudy usually plays Pirelli, and his understudy was on. It turns out that Pirelli's understudy was the college roommate of the man sitting behind me. He had tried to see *Sweeney* when his friend was on but there had been a scenery breakdown, so now maybe he can see him perform the whole role.

Sondheim has been my idol for forty years. My first Sondheim show this trip was the acclaimed revival of *Merrily We Roll Along*, which has some of the best songs in any musical but flopped when it debuted in 1981. Since then, there have been an unprecedented series of productions trying to fix it. Sondheim added some new songs, which I don't think are as strong as the originals, and cut a couple. It's selling out, with high ticket prices, likely because of Daniel Radcliffe of Harry Potter fame playing Charlie, which he did adorably. The director, who had once played Mary in London in the 1990s, was hailed for finally getting the show right. I think her biggest contribution was making the early friendship of the three leads

so warm and joyful that it made the events that followed all the more heartbreaking. I did like it but if I were working on the revisions, I would have cut out the new songs and the interstitial title song that keeps asking the same questions over and over, and has always gotten on my nerves. (It's a rarity for me not to think that everything Sondheim does is truly great.) I would have then done it as a long one-act. Since the play moves backwards in time, I would have simply flashed the year above the stage. There's also a bit of dialogue that didn't ring true to me that I would have cut. But they didn't ask me. Story of my life.

I was running out of shows that I really wanted to see, and there are not many plays with Wednesday matinees anymore. There are some well-reviewed big musicals that I have mixed feelings about seeing because of their pop scores (which I don't care for) and their loudness. Then, in my Facebook feed, an announcement about a straight play (that means a play without music, not a play about the homosexually challenged), *Swing State*, brought in from the Goodman Theater in Chicago and written by Rebecca Gilman and directed by the highly admired Robert Falls. It played in the West Village's Minetta Lane theater. It was superb. A truly moving, great play.

I went out for another delicious Japanese dinner with three dear friends. We then saw the revival of Sondheim's masterpiece *Sweeney Todd*, the first full-scale production with a large orchestra since the 1979 original, starring Josh Groban. As I mentioned, he was out sick. His understudy was probably a better actor but not as good a singer (who could be?), although still good. The score is so beautiful that I'd love to hear it be gorgeously sung by all the actors. Some of the singers were excellent; some were no doubt hired more for their acting ability, with weaker voices. (Sondheim preferred having great actors to great singers.) I find it hard to believe that they couldn't find people who could both act and sing powerfully. But in any case, it's a fine, well-acted and -directed production. The closing moment was especially thrilling.

Annaleigh Ashford, who plays Mrs. Lovett, is a comedic genius with a great voice. The role is usually played broadly and big to offer comic relief from the heavy plot; she was still broad but kept it smaller and quieter, with volume less than that of the other actors. I suspect she was going for making it more real and also saving her voice so she could do eight shows a week, which is grueling for lead singers.

Thursday, I visited the Met Museum and saw part of the Manet/Degas exhibit. They were friends who both influenced one another and competed.

Thursday night, I saw *Here We Are*. Stephen Sondheim and the playwright David Ives had been collaborating on a new musical for several years based on two art films by Luis Buñuel. Sondheim was dissatisfied with his work but a week before he died in 2021, he gave permission for a production to go ahead. It was widely reported that he hadn't finished the second act but Ives found a way to make it work. Oddly, there was no song list in the program, although an usher said that they weren't making changes at this point, but the second act did not have nearly as many songs. However, it had musical underscoring and I hardly noticed the fewer songs, especially since the darker turn of the story was well suited to more dialogue.

One of Sondheim's worries was that, at age 91, he was repeating himself musically. His collaborators assured him that he wasn't but that if he was stealing from himself, he was stealing from the best. (Pablo Picasso is widely quoted as having said that good artists borrow, great artists steal.) I did, in fact, constantly hear short fragments of music that reminded me of earlier Sondheim shows, especially his previous two, *Passion* and *Road Show*. It was maybe a little distracting but I really didn't mind, and there are still original ideas in the score. The lyrics, however, seemed up to his impeccable standards.

Ives is known for his masterly, inventive wordplay. I had seen his *All in the Timing* in 1993 and never forgot how much I loved it. *Here We Are* is uproariously funny, especially in the first act, and clever. I guess you'd describe it as absurdist. I haven't seen the Buñuel films but I assume that they were, too. To me, it was metaphysical and philosophical, giving many views about the meaning of life and the need to live in the now, hence *Here We Are*. Its top-notch cast included Bobby Cannavale, Steven Pasquale, and David Hyde Pierce.

New York City is constantly tearing things down and building new skyscrapers. This Off-Broadway theater, The Shed, enters through the lobby of a new tall building on the far West Side that is still mostly pretty rundown (it's where buses come off the Lincoln tunnel). You check in there and then go up several very tall escalators to enter the theater. Pretty cool. There's a bar/café at the other side of the lobby. The theater is a state-of-the-art black box. However, it seems that nothing has

been learned: the seats were extremely cramped, like many (but not all) of the old Broadway houses. It's like the airlines cramming in people like sardines with no concern for people's comfort and even health. Meanwhile, Americans just keep getting bigger. With a new theater, it's a missed opportunity.

Because I am a professional psychic, I know that every one of you is dying to hear about Broadway restrooms. I will not disappoint you.

It appears that many were remodeled during the eighteen months that shows were dark during Covid. Now, most of the sink faucets give only hot water—often too hot for me, but the better to kill germs with. (This seems to be a trend. When I was in Zurich in early 2020, the old building we were using for our workshop was going to close down for remodeling for a few months, partly because they needed hot water in the restrooms. They didn't have showers, so this was for the sinks.)

In addition, they have signs that say, "Gender diversity is welcome here. Please use the restroom that best fits your gender identity or expression." I think that this is a good thing, but then I generally think that being woke is a good thing.

In the restrooms of most of the shows I went to, I only saw PWP's (people with phalluses, or who at least appeared to have one—I can't prove it; I didn't have time to check everyone) in the Rooms That Have Urinals (formerly known as men's rooms). In one show, however, an usher was encouraging women waiting in the notoriously long lines for the Rooms That Have Only Stalls (formerly known as women's rooms) to feel free to use stalls in the men's rooms. (The usher was grappling with what to now call these rooms, hence the new names which are approximately what he came up with.) I saw a couple of grateful women with daughters who really needed go, after an intermission-less show, dash for the more-available stalls in the men's room. And you know what? The sky did not fall in. There were partitions around the urinals and privacy felt adequately protected. And so we move into the twenty-first century.

Incidentally, that's another trend: More shows without an intermission, usually under a hundred minutes (but still at full Broadway prices).

Outside of theaters, finding a clean public restroom when out and about is an eternal challenge in New York City. Most places will only let you use theirs if you're a customer. Someone working at the TKTS line gave me a great tip: The Hard Rock Café in Times Square—anyone can walk in and use them, and they're nice. Starbucks and McDonald's are other options, although one Starbucks restroom I checked was out of order, and McDonald's' are not usually very clean.

In more restroom news: I was at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) today (wonderful! my first visit in decades), and one of their men's rooms was the most modern (makes sense) and sleek I've ever seen, with stalls all around with floor to ceiling doors, in gray. Very classy and beautiful, like the rest of the museum. BUT no urinals! The only way to tell that it is a men's room is the sign. Otherwise, as a Room That Has Only Stalls, it would be easy to think you were in the wrong one if you're a PWP, although existentially, is there really a wrong one today? Anyway, I looked and saw another PWP, and that reassured me that I hadn't made a wrong turn (there was no sign up about gender inclusivity, so I wanted to be on the safe side).

Now that this crucial topic has been thoroughly covered ...

I lived in New York City from 1985 to 1995, and have visited many times since. I do not remember Times Square ever having been so loud, especially on weekends. Now, there are bicycle-driven carriages, each one blaring its own loud music. I've also never seen it so crowded. People are getting out in public with a vengeance, it appears. Also, I frequently smelled pot smoke—it was legalized for recreational use in 2021.

Virtually every show I saw had a full house, and an audience that roared with approval. These were good, well-reviewed shows, but I think people were just really wanting to have a great time. It's been noted for a while that almost everything in the U.S. gets a standing ovation (not the case, say, in London) but the roars are bigger than ever. I'm sure it's a real high for the actors.

A personal note about my NYC experience: I was standing on a crowded subway car. There was an old woman standing next to me, and a young woman offered her seat to her, which I thought was sweet. Then the young man facing me offered ME his seat. I exclaimed, "I didn't think I was that old!" He made no comment. I

thanked him warmly. I didn't need to sit, but I prefer sitting. So that is one benefit of sliding into decrepitude, along with getting Medicare and soon, Social Security. Wednesday discounts and wisdom are others. Have I missed any? And I realized that that really old lady next to me was probably no more than ten years my senior, if that. At least the bags under my eyes are Gucci.

About a year ago, the Museum of Broadway opened. I visited it. It's rather ingeniously nestled into the upper floors of a narrow old building. On the street level is a gift shop and ticket sales. Then you go up to the fourth floor and follow the white arrows on the floor through several small black rooms and descend back down. It's largely photos, programs, and text but there are several costumes, props, scenery models, and immersive exhibits as well. It was well-staffed with young theater enthusiasts who had encyclopedic knowledge about shows. Did you know, for instance, that Lucille Ball was fired as a showgirl in the *Ziegfeld Follies* after a week because, although she was a good dancer, she kept losing her balance due to the huge heavy headdress? She ended up later using that for an episode of *I Love Lucy*.

On Friday night, Oct. 6, my second cousin Rebecca Hoodwin, who has been a NYC actress since the 1970s, was in an off-off-Broadway showcase of a comedy, *The Chesapeake Chicks*, having its first performances ever at the Theatre for the New City. I loved the downtown "Let's put on a show!" vibe. It was funny and I think it has real possibilities. Afterwards, Becca and I went to Veselka, a Ukrainian restaurant in the neighborhood celebrating its sixty-ninth anniversary (which I'm also about to do). Sixty-nine is a beautiful number, don't you agree?

On Saturday, I saw *Gutenberg—the Musical!* a two-hander starring Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells, who met co-starring in *Book of Mormon* and became fast friends with great comic chemistry. Unfortunately, Josh was out sick. (I had seen him Sunday night in the audience of *Purlie Victorious*.) His understudy was very good (he looked like John Candy), with a lot of heart, but it was disappointing not to see that much-reported chemistry in action. What's suspicious is that on the previous Wednesday, Josh Groban was also out of *Sweeney Todd*. Is this a conspiracy of the Illuminati using mind-control nanoparticles in vaccines to take out all Broadway's stars named Josh as a display of their power? If so, are Jennifers next? I fear for Broadway.

Seriously, there's been an increase in the need for understudies since Covid, but it's a fact of life of theater-going that the star you wanted to see might be out. The box office is happy to exchange your ticket, but those who are only in town for a limited time will probably stay. The theaters have gotten better about letting people know online (and via texts and emails) and at the TKTS half-price ticket booth if a star is out. A fair number of seats were empty at *Sweeney Todd* the night Josh Groban was out—not a lot but it was noticeable.

I knew going in that *Gutenberg* would be silly, not really my thing, but it was funny and well-done.

In the evening, I saw a fine new play, *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*, a slice-of-life in a hair salon in Harlem with a cavalcade of vivid characters and terrific actors. I was African in my first two lifetimes on the physical plane, so I really related to it.

Sunday, I had lunch in the theater district with two close friends at a Chinese restaurant. I learned that the way to know that a Chinese restaurant hasn't been Americanized, at least in NYC, is that it doesn't serve brown rice, and this one didn't. I got to try a couple new things.

Afterward, we saw *& Juliet*, which we all liked a lot. It uses catchy pop/rock songs by Max Martin and various collaborators, and placed them into a clever new script reimagining *Romeo and Juliet* if Juliet hadn't killed herself. It's an up-to-the-minute story about women getting to make their own choices, with a trans character.

In the evening, I saw *Here Lies Love*, with songs by David Byrne and Fatboy Slim. With echoes of *Evita*, it's about another dictator/wife Imelda Marcos (although shoes are not mentioned). It's an extraordinary physical production, directed by Alex Timbers, who also directed *Gutenberg* and *Moulin Rouge*. The small theater's main floor was turned into a disco dance floor where audience members stood and occasionally danced around moving platforms that the actors performed on, as well as in front of the mezzanine and elsewhere (but not on a conventional stage). It was the most immersive production imaginable, with a state-of-the-art light show and projections everywhere. It's impressive but very busy. Several times, actors invited seated audience members in the mezzanine to stand, clap, and dance in place. Like so many shows I saw, they know how to work a crowd.

In general, advanced technologies are becoming an increasing part of big-budget theater. What can now be done on stage would have been unimaginable a couple generations ago.

In Moss Hart's classic 1959 autobiography *Act One* about starting out as a playwright, he tells about his first play (with George Kaufman), *Once in a Lifetime*, that just wasn't working. Finally, they scuttled a very expensive, hilarious set that opened the second act and replaced it with a quiet, heart-to-heart moment, and the play became a smash hit. The lesson, which I think of often when seeing shows, is that there needs to be a balance of quiet moments with the loud ones so that a play can breathe and audiences can process. Today, people are used to nonstop bombardment, fostering an adrenaline addiction, but I really appreciate quiet moments. Many shows today have too few of them.

David Byrne (Talking Heads) is a well-respected songwriter, and I don't know enough about rock music to have an educated opinion about it, but as a piece of storytelling, I didn't find *Here Lies Love* to have much character development or to be very interesting. For example, a lot of time in the beginning is devoted to showing Marcos as a sweet, beautiful young woman. Then suddenly, she's a monster. The only hint at how she got there was that her husband had affairs and she was angry. A friend who had seen it earlier really liked it. For me, it was worth seeing for the staging but I didn't really enjoy it.

That was my last play, thirteen total. Believe it or not, that's not a lot for me for one of my NYC trips—I once saw twenty-five, if memory serves. It's Monday as I write, a night that's dark for most Broadway and Off-Broadway shows. I was planning to see *Six*, one of the few with Monday night shows that's usually available on TKTS, but today is Columbus Day, and it sold out. I wasn't sure I wanted to see it, so that's fine. Tomorrow, I see a couple friends. Wednesday, I'm up at 4 a.m. for an 8 a.m. flight out of JFK. Thoughts and prayers, please!