

## Hollywood Stars on Broadway: A Critical Symposium

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“You’re no actor; you’re a celebrity – let’s be clear on that.” The embittered *New York Times* theater critic in *Birdman* (2014) has not only Michael Keaton’s beleaguered thespian in her sights when pitching these words, but all the “untrained” and “entitled” movie stars trespassing on the Broadway theater. Like much of Alejandro González Inárritu’s trenchant backstage drama, this moment invokes a salient trend in contemporary American pop culture – in this instance, the prevalence of Hollywood stars alighting on the New York stage. Indeed, the current Broadway season has already delivered two high-profile star vehicles – Al Pacino in David Mamet’s *China Doll* and Bruce Willis in William Goldman’s *Misery* – and recent seasons have showcased the “star power” of Denzel Washington, Tom Hanks, Scarlett Johansson, Julia Roberts, Daniel Craig, Jane Fonda, Robin Williams, and various other Hollywood luminaries. These actors, in turn, expand a heritage of film stars, from Dietrich and Fonda to Taylor and Burton, that made temporary excursions on Broadway. The phenomenon of stars on stage, then, is hardly new, but it has intensified in the last decade, and it signals an increased synergy between the Hollywood studios and New York’s theater industry. It also testifies to the renewed premium placed on Broadway appearances by Hollywood stars themselves, whether for artistic purposes or for strategic career advancement. We invited some of New York’s leading drama critics to comment on the proliferation of Hollywood stars on the Broadway stage.

That Broadway producers court movie stars – and are keenly receptive to overtures from stars and their agents – has bred controversy within the theater community. A star-driven production can seem nothing more than a calculated commercial enterprise. Above-the-line talent from Hollywood inflates the stage production’s initial costs, which in turn ramps up ticket prices. (The production budget of Pacino’s *China Doll* was \$3.5 million, with average ticket prices at \$152, and premium seats exceeding \$340.) Increasingly, too, it is the putatively “entitled” star – rather than the Broadway producer – that dictates terms: the number of performance weeks and the dates of production may be determined by the star’s movie schedule, while “first-magnitude” stars are able to command top-flight salaries. [1] However, the theater industry benefits from Hollywood star appearances in various ways, as the commentators point out below. For Ben Brantley, chief drama critic at the *New York Times*, “It seems curmudgeonly – and too easy – to dismiss celebrity-driven productions on Broadway” [2]. For one thing, certain stage roles are tailor-made for star charisma and gravitas – McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, for example, a role played on stage by Kirk Douglas, Gary Sinise, and Christian Slater. And, of course, star casting generates excitement among theatergoers. If there is an element of (in Brantley’s words) the “freak-show tent” in watching Nicole Kidman (*The Blue Room*) or Madonna (*Speed-the-Plow*) in live performance – an element literalized by Bradley Cooper’s recent turn in *The Elephant Man* – the successful star-driven production surpasses the expected delivery of star glamour. From Philip Seymour Hoffman (*Death of a Salesman*) and Scarlett Johansson (*A View from the Bridge*) to Denzel Washington (*Fences*) and Tom Hanks (*Lucky Guy*), Hollywood stars have delivered performances to match any in the Broadway theater.

The upsurge in star-centered shows can be understood as part of a wider strategy, one in which pre-established Hollywood properties are repackaged for Broadway consumption. Hence the flurry of screen-to-stage adaptations that has emerged in the last ten years, often in musicalized form (e.g. *School of Rock*, *Catch Me if You Can*, *Bullets Over Broadway*, *Sister Act*, *Rocky*, *9 to 5*, *Once*, and *Bonnie & Clyde*). The same period has also witnessed the consolidation of Disney (*Mary Poppins*, *Newsies*, *Aladdin*) as a major institution on Broadway [3], while Harvey Weinstein has become a key player partly by producing stage adaptations of popular movies (e.g. *Finding Neverland*, *The Addams Family*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*). [4] For the Broadway producer, a pre-sold Hollywood property reduces financial risk (an important concern, since 75 percent of Broadway shows make a loss); for the Hollywood studio, a Broadway adaptation refreshes the audience's appetite for the original film while cultivating remake potential. As a pre-established commodity, the Hollywood star assimilates to this cross-media strategy. Other industrial factors in the early 2000s prompted stars to undertake stage work, as when the 2007-8 writers' strike and the economic downturn led to hiatuses in film production. Though pay scales are lower than in Hollywood, a short run on Broadway provided stars a steady income and regular work during the financial crisis.

Hollywood stars have always appeared on Broadway, but the tradition has changed. No longer is Broadway acting a modestly-paid endeavor – today's stars receive substantial payouts for limited runs, albeit not on the same scale as for a major Hollywood production. Nor is the Broadway theater any longer perceived as a rest home for veteran stars whose movie careers have fizzled. Today, young stars such as Daniel Radcliffe and Emma Stone seek Broadway exposure (and Broadway producers embrace them, eager to attract the elusive youth market). Moreover, stars at the pinnacle of their movie fame now embark on stage productions. For young actors and relative newcomers, the New York theater constitutes both a training ground and a testing ground – teen idols such as Radcliffe (*Equus*) and Macaulay Culkin (*Madame Melville*) seek at once to hone their performance skills and prove their aptitude. For polymaths such as James Franco and Shia LaBeouf, a Broadway show relieves a creative itch and adds another string to their bow.

Complementing these incentives are some long-standing payoffs, pertinent to stars at any phase of their career: a hit show, positive reviews, and Tony recognition boost the performer's pedigree, and can be parlayed into better roles in Hollywood. In addition, many film actors find stage performance artistically fulfilling. The star can claim greater authorship of her performance on stage than in film, tracing an entire arc of characterization without being editorialized. Further, as Jack Nicholson once remarked, "In Hollywood you do your day's work, you come home, and eight to ten months later you find out what everyone thought about it. But in the theater there is this immediacy of response which I have been sorely missing all my life." [5] Nicholson's Broadway aspirations have yet to bear fruit, but his desire for an instant, organic, "live" reaction is widely shared among film and television actors.

Still, Broadway poses challenges and professional risks for the movie actor. Some stars balk at the repetitiveness of eight performances per week (even stage-trained stars, such as Marlon Brando and Anthony Hopkins, can find the routine unbearable). Jeanine Basinger, moreover, argues that "The movie frame and the proscenium arch are two distinctly different acting spaces. Although some people can fill both with ease, adapting as needed, the majority cannot." [6] Aside from the technical demands of stage performance, the star must reckon with the New York

theater's critical establishment. Unlike movie criticism, which tends to be geographically diffuse, the prime source of critical power and influence in the American theater is located in the *New York Times* and its chief drama critic Ben Brantley. Ominously, Brantley has been labeled a "celebrity underminer" – an epithet he refutes. Nevertheless, an unfavorable review by the *Times* can be devastating to a show's longevity, and it can tarnish a star's esteem. (On the other hand, a positive review from Brantley can be advantageous to the careers of younger stars.) Then there is the *New York Post's* Michael Riedel, whose influential theater column can put shows and stars under pressure long before opening night (as with *China Doll* and Julie Taymor's infamous *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*). Such intense media scrutiny can be daunting even for seasoned Hollywood players coming to the New York stage.

Whereas historically a negative review from the *Times* could be detrimental to a show's commercial success, or even precipitate its premature closure, nowadays Broadway producers trust that a marketable star name on the marquee will render a production "critic proof." This indeed has proven the case with both *China Doll* and *Misery* – the bankable images of Pacino and Willis ensured that these shows turned a profit through advance ticket sales, long before the critics' (largely negative) reviews appeared in print. Since both productions had limited runs of between 14 and 16 weeks, Pacino and Willis performed to mostly sold-out houses, with *China Doll* exceeding \$1 million in weekly revenues. On this evidence, the star-driven Broadway show is impervious to bad reviews.

However, this may be true only of the top-flight stars such as Pacino, Willis, and a few others (including Roberts, Hanks, Jackman, and Craig). For stars of second-magnitude or less, the verdicts of the New York theater critics remain pivotal to a production's commercial prospects, as well as to the star's future on Broadway (a critical debacle can deter stars from returning to theater acting). Given their integral effect on a Hollywood actor's stage career (as well as on Broadway adaptations of Hollywood movies), the New York drama critics are uniquely placed to elucidate the so-called Hollywood invasion of Broadway theater.

The following commentary is provided by drama critics Ben Brantley (*The New York Times*); Jesse Green (*New York Magazine*); Elisabeth Vincentelli (*New York Post*); Tom Sellar (*The Village Voice*); Richard Zoglin (*Time* magazine); David Cote (theater editor of *Time Out New York*); and theater columnist Michael Riedel (*New York Post*, and co-host of PBS's *Theater Talk*).

**Hollywood stars appearing on Broadway is not a new phenomenon, but it is more common nowadays. What accounts for this change?**

**Ben Brantley:** Yes, there are more film stars appearing on Broadway than usual. For whatever reasons, it has a higher cool quotient for young actresses and actors than it once did. There are also more "special event" arrangements, wherein stars can appear for only a limited run, which gives them the necessary flexibility in relation to their shooting schedules.

**Elisabeth Vincentelli:** It all boils down to the ruthless economics of Broadway. It's very hard for shows to recoup their investment and stars are seen as a way to stack the odds in your favor. And yes – what's changed is the explosion of limited-run engagements, where a star signs up for just three months. This creates an incentive for people to buy tickets since their window of

opportunity is small, and from the stars' point of view they aren't stuck spending a year away from the (more lucrative) cameras.

**Tom Sellar:** Commercial theater tickets are tremendously expensive, reflecting the ever-escalating costs of producing in New York. Broadway nowadays is theater largely concocted for the rich and for tourists, with ticket prices in the hundreds of dollars. Because of this expense and because, generally speaking, those Broadway audiences do not have adventurous tastes, for the past decades producers have increasingly emphasized stars with name recognition as well as productions based on well-known sources: adaptations of popular films and books, or anything else that is already a familiar, known quantity for audiences who need some guarantee that the draw will be worth the price of admission. It's a marketing consideration above all, not necessarily an artistic one.

### **What financial difference does a movie star make to a Broadway production?**

**Michael Riedel:** The usual star contract is a decent weekly salary – maybe \$20,000 to \$25,000 – plus a percentage of the profit. A sold-out show could earn a star around \$2.5 million for a run of, say, 16 weeks. It works for everybody – producers sell tickets on the name, and the star makes a nice packet and can go back to the movies.

**Jesse Green:** An old rule of thumb for non-musicals on Broadway suggested budgeting them so that they could make a profit while running at 60 percent capacity. But most non-star non-musicals, unless subsidized by a subscription theater, can no longer count on even 60 percent, or keep that rate going long enough in a crowded marketplace. A big star can bring the expected capacity above 90 percent, or even in some cases above 100 percent (with “premium” tickets) so that the production not only has a better chance of recouping, but can do so more quickly. That last point is important because those big stars don't want to make a long commitment; they usually have other projects immediately lined up. Fourteen to sixteen weeks seems to do the trick if the show is well put together. Which means, ideally, not only having a star, but a recognizable title or a name playwright and generally low running costs.

Al Pacino in David Mamet's *China Doll*, which just opened [in December 2015], is perhaps the perfect monster creation of this type: 14 weeks, one set, and, beyond the star, a cast consisting of just one unknown, plus an understudy, probably paid near scale. That the reviews have been negative makes absolutely no difference [7]; the show is nearly sold out. Even paying Pacino a very large salary and a cut of the box office, the producers will walk away on January 31 with a tidy profit. Would a new Mamet play without Pacino do as well on Broadway? It might not even be produced. So for this sort of play, the star is everything, more the *raison d'être* than the play itself.

### **Is Broadway now reliant on Hollywood stars? Can it thrive financially without them?**

**Vincentelli:** Hollywood stars deliver a lot of media interest but their presence doesn't automatically translate into ticket sales. Shows like *The Book of Mormon* and *Hamilton* thrive without stars – not to mention long-running blockbusters like *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Wicked*, and *Jersey Boys*. But those are all musicals, which tend to do better no matter what. Where Hollywood stars make a difference in terms of box office is with plays: It's hard to

fathom many – not all, but many – plays ever making it to Broadway without some Hollywood pizzazz, and that’s a rather depressing state of affairs.

**Riedel:** Plays need household names to attract theatergoers, especially since the going rate is over \$200 for an orchestra seat.

**Brantley:** Certain kinds of Broadway shows do not require stars, if (again) there’s another kind of brand name at work (i.e. Walt Disney) or a theme-park lure, by which I mean bright, big spectacle that turns a show into a “fun” family event. There are exceptions of course – most notably, *Hamilton*, the hip-hop musical about America’s founding fathers, which has been claimed by generation-spanning audiences as their own. But *Hamilton* is a blessed freak.

**What is the power hierarchy in a star-driven Broadway production? Is the Hollywood star truly (in William Goldman’s phrase [8]) “the muscle”?**

**Vincentelli:** I’m not privy to what happens behind the scenes but my understanding is that some stars have a lot of influence on which play gets done and who directs it. Star A will go to a producer or artistic director and say, “I really want to do Play X.” Then the production is built around Star A, from the co-stars to the director. In fact, some directors are known as little more than accommodating “star wranglers.” This isn’t necessarily the healthiest situation, or the one most conducive to good theater, but there you have it.

**What are the main incentives for a Hollywood star to appear on Broadway nowadays?**

**Sellar:** Prestige and press. Appearing on the stage suggests or confers a sort of bona fide artistic credential. It’s a chance to demonstrate acting “chops” with a different kind of acting process, one which challenges the performer to recreate the performance night after night, doing eight shows a week. It might also be a chance to take on a role that would not be offered in the film industry – for example, Hedwig [first played on Broadway by Neil Patrick Harris].

**Brantley:** There seems to be a renewed emphasis on the idea that legitimate theater legitimizes stars – that if you demonstrate your chops on stage, you’re somehow the real thing. Hence, the presence of (relatively) young stars like Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Stone, Michelle Williams, Jonny Lee Miller, Cate Blanchett, et al. (This as opposed to the idea that Broadway was where stars went when their careers died.) Less cynically, I should say that some stars (Radcliffe among them) simply seem to enjoy being on stage and receiving the energizing charge of a live relationship with an audience.

**Vincentelli:** Some stars started by doing stage work before climbing the celebrity ladder, and they remain faithful to their early love. They’re often British (Ian McKellen, Patrick Stewart, Helen Mirren) but not necessarily (Bradley Cooper, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Liev Schreiber). Others started with TV or movies and became curious about the stage afterward, like Julia Roberts, Julianne Moore, Jim Parsons, Emma Stone, Greta Gerwig. There is an element of vindication in both cases: I’ve still got the chops/I want to prove I have the chops. In general I would say serious actors – serious about their work, I mean – like to challenge themselves, and theater certainly does that.

**Riedel:** A lot of movie stars [who] were stage actors first prefer doing a play to making a movie, which can be dull since they spend a lot of time in their trailer. Movie stars with no stage experience will do it to burnish their acting credentials in the eyes of the critics and their peers. And movie work is in short supply for a lot of actors who were once A-list. Good reviews in a good play boost their profile.

**How would you evaluate the professional risk for a Hollywood star making her or his Broadway debut?**

**David Cote:** Jeremy Piven, bailing out of *Speed-the-Plow* and complaining of mercury poisoning, seems to have been banished to the BBC and PBS, but he's the only casualty I can think of. Most celebrities get more out of Broadway than the other way around – besides easy box office.

**Vincentelli:** Julia Roberts' one Broadway outing (which I didn't see) was notoriously badly received. It didn't seem to hurt her movie career but I would venture it must have been hard for her personally. If a movie tanks, you can put it behind you; if you get bad reviews, you still have to go back on stage for weeks, maybe months. Julianne Moore's Broadway outing (which I did see) was terrible, but it didn't hurt her professionally at all: she remained very busy and won an Oscar last year.

**Brantley:** I don't think the risk factor is all that high for film stars on Broadway. Julia Roberts clearly wasn't at home on stage when she did *Three Days of Rain* a decade ago, but she made the effort and generated tremendous goodwill as a consequence. (She also made the play a hit; there will always be audiences who simply want to be see their gods in the flesh.) Egos may occasionally be bruised, but otherwise, there's not damage. And in some cases, a sluggish or stereotyped career can be jump-started, as was true for Nicole Kidman when she did *The Blue Room* more than 15 years ago.

For American stars, at least, I think the West End is regarded as a safer place to test stage chops. British critics tend to go easier on stars, for one thing, and for another, performances in the West End receive less coverage in American papers, even in these one-world days of the Internet.

**Riedel:** The risk for the Hollywood star is humiliation. There are so many movies out there that nobody pays all that much attention to critics. But if you got socked in *The New York Times* for a Broadway appearance, the entertainment industry will notice.

**Continuing the theme of risk, why have particular stars struggled to adapt to theater acting? What generally are the most common causes of failure?**

**Riedel:** The movie star who came a cropper was Julia Roberts in *Three Days of Rain*. She's a radiant presence on screen, but dull as dishwater on stage. She got mediocre reviews and was snubbed for a Tony nomination. But she played the game and instead of pouting, showed up at all the pre-Tony events. People liked her for that. But she's not been on Broadway since.

**Vincentelli:** Julianne Moore sticks with me because I love her movie work and I was crushed by her performance in *The Vertical Hour*. Admittedly the play wasn't very good, but she couldn't

overcome the poor script – unlike her co-star, Bill Nighy, who escaped with his reputation intact. She looked tentative, uncomfortable. Whereas her work comes across as psychologically sound in the movies, it felt forced and superficial on stage.

James Franco was awful in *Of Mice and Men*. Rarely have I seen a leading man look so uninvolved in the task at hand. He was completely transparent. Interestingly his co-star was another Broadway newbie, Chris O’Dowd, who fared extremely well. You need a willingness to commit to the moment, and O’Dowd had it.

I’m not counting someone like Al Pacino – I’m not a big fan of his stage work, but he started on stage so it’s not like he transitioned toward it. His last two shows have been terrible, and he was terrible in them: a sleepy revival of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and the atrocious *China Doll*.

**Brantley:** The most satisfying debut by a Hollywood star on Broadway in recent years was probably Scarlett Johansson’s in *A View from the Bridge* in 2010. She had a supporting role, and blended right into a strong theatrical cast. On the other hand, when she played Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* a few years later, she was – not out of her depth exactly, and not even miscast. I think she could have owned that part. But she needed stronger directorial guidance than she seemed to have received. And strangely, though she was definitely a key in making *Bridge* a hit, *Cat* was not a box office success. Roberts, whom I alluded to before, just wasn’t at ease on a big stage when she did *Three Days of Rain*. She might have fared better in a smaller, Off Broadway house, where she didn’t feel the need to register LARGE.

Radcliffe was fine as the boy in *Equus*, his Broadway debut; game, but not quite entirely equipped for the singing and dancing lead in *How To Succeed in Business (Without Really Trying)*; and superb as the title character in Martin McDonagh’s *The Cripple of Inishmaan*.

Siena Miller was a dud in her Broadway debut in *Miss Julie*, but rebounded nicely when she did *Cabaret* last year. It’s partly in the casting, partly in the comfort factor that comes with being well cast and well guided by a reassuring but commanding director.

**Richard Zoglin:** I honestly can’t think of any major failures or embarrassments by Hollywood stars on Broadway. But I would say that Julia Roberts is one movie star whose charisma onscreen does not translate to the stage. And Catherine Zeta-Jones (despite the Tony award) was out of her depth in *A Little Night Music*.

**In your view, which Hollywood actors have had the most impressive careers on the New York stage? Which performances would you identify as landmarks?**

**Vincentelli:** Meryl Streep, of course. I’ve seen her only twice on stage, and one of those performances, in *Mother Courage*, was for the ages. Among those juggling stage and screen impressively I would cite Hugh Jackman (*The Boy from Oz*; *Oklahoma*), Cate Blanchett (*Uncle Vanya*), Isabelle Huppert (*4.48 Psychosis*; *Quartett*), Denzel Washington (*Fences*; *A Raisin in the Sun*). I admire Daniel Radcliffe’s willingness to test himself if not so much his actual performances. Scarlett Johansson impressed me the two times I saw her live.

One note about Denzel Washington: What I liked best in *A Raisin in the Sun* was his visible joy in being part of an ace ensemble. He was great at taking a backseat and letting others drive the scene. Not all stars can do that.

It's too early to talk about a stage "career" yet, but Emma Stone was sensational in *Cabaret*. I would love to see her do Chekhov, for instance. Tom Hanks was also very good in *Lucky Guy* – like Stone, he had an amazing confidence. Ditto for Greta Gerwig.

Peter Sarsgaard's first couple of performances were wan, but his Hamlet was quite interesting. He brought a real point of view to the role, and admirably stuck with it. Another one who stuck with it and improved was Jake Gyllenhaal, who even threw himself into a limited-run concert revival of *Little Shop of Horrors* with just ten days of rehearsal. You could tell he loved the experience and his enthusiasm was contagious.

**Riedel:** The go-to Hollywood stars are Hugh Jackman, Daniel Craig, Denzel Washington, Kevin Spacey, and Scarlett Johansson. They sell tickets and almost always turn in good performances.

**Zoglin:** I would say that Johansson's performance in the 2010 revival of *A View from the Bridge* was something of a landmark – she was an unknown quantity as a stage actor, and yet she gave a very credible, Tony-winning performance. Commercially, I think Denzel Washington's forays on Broadway – in *Julius Caesar*, *Fences*, *Raisin in the Sun* – have shown how much box-office clout these Hollywood stars can have.

**Cote:** Bryan Cranston as LBJ in *All the Way*: He understands how to fill a stage and use his voice and body to command a scene. Unlike most movie actors who shrink on stage, he expanded to fill the vacuum. Bradley Cooper and Paul Rudd starred opposite Julia Roberts in *Three Days of Rain*, and they both left her in the dust. Cooper came back to do a splendid and physically impressive *Elephant Man* a year or so ago. He's a complete actor. Viola Davis is a force of nature, no matter what medium. And Denzel Washington can hold his own, even if his range is stolid to slightly ruffled. I'd say that William H. Macy was able to be a "Mamet actor" and have success on TV and in movies apart from Mamet. Mary-Louise Parker has been marvelous on stage and TV. (I think the transition from stage to TV is more common and successful than stage to movies and vice versa.) Paul Giamatti is a brilliant stage and film actor but he doesn't do enough stage. John Goodman was a splendid Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot* several seasons ago. Daniel Radcliffe has a warm, bright intensity that shows the *Harry Potter* films weren't just a franchise fluke. He has genuine stage charisma.

**Some Hollywood stars appear on Broadway infrequently, while others such as Jesse Eisenberg invest themselves seriously in the theater world in various ways. Are actor-playwrights such as Eisenberg considered by the New York theater establishment to be interlopers or legitimate artistic contributors to the theater?**

**Brantley:** I think Eisenberg has respect, though it's important to remember that so far his role as star/playwright has been limited to Off Broadway. His plays have been canny works, if imperfect, and he has shown a willingness to play roles (hell, he conceives them himself) that are not flattering in any conventional sense. He specializes in playing entitled jerks, which shows



some courage (or a masochistic streak). Anyway, his willingness to go out on a limb – and to work hard while doing so – has won him plenty of props.

**Vincentelli:** There may have been a sense that Eisenberg was “slumming” at first, but he’s been hanging in there and has proved himself to be a serious addition to the scene. I was unconvinced by his first couple of efforts but his last one, *The Spoils*, was savage and uncompromising. In general when actors keep coming back, they establish their bona fides. Especially if they alternate between Broadway and Off Broadway: their willingness to take a pay cut and accept the grind of a theater schedule is appreciated by locals.

I seem to remember that Ethan Hawke used to be thought of as a pretty-boy dilettante when he started, but he’s been such a stalwart of New York theater for the past decade that he’s much liked now. His passion for the stage is contagious, and he’s started directing (as has Cynthia Nixon).

**We’ve mentioned Al Pacino, who reunited with David Mamet this season. How would you evaluate Pacino’s long-running career on Broadway?**

**Brantley:** Pacino gives a sloppy, self-indulgent performance in *China Doll*, Mamet’s latest, as he did in the recent revival of *Glengarry Glen Ross*. He was terrific in Mamet a few decades ago. I think this has little to do, though, with Hollywood versus Broadway. Pacino’s excesses on stage (and by the way, he was fabulous in *The Merchant of Venice*, which wasn’t that long ago) aren’t about a film actor trying to adjust to Broadway. He cut his teeth in the theater, and he’s perfectly comfortable there. I suppose you could argue that his screen fame is what’s made audiences willing to see him on stage no matter what he does – and forgive him, no matter what he does.

**Zoglin:** Pacino was obviously a stage actor before he got into movies, and he has done an excellent job of shuttling back and forth between the two. But I think he’s flailing now, overacting and becoming something of a parody of himself. Partly this is because of weak material. The new Mamet play, *China Doll*, is pretty terrible, and Pacino compensates by chewing the scenery shamelessly.

**Cote:** *China Doll* was a deep disappointment: an actor past his prime trying to make a deeply flawed and inert play seem better than it is, and failing. Physically, vocally, and in every way, Pacino seemed lost, far too inward, and miserable in the act of imposing coherence on an incoherent script. Better he should have read Mamet’s greatest hits, or just his favorite bits from Shakespeare.

**Riedel:** Pacino and Mamet have been a disaster. [9] Mamet hasn’t written a decent play in years, and Pacino is old and tired. A pathetic showing all around.

**Vincentelli:** I’ve only seen Pacino live in three shows: *The Merchant of Venice*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and *China Doll*. He was serviceable in the first, decent in the second, and terrible in the last. It feels unfair to cast judgment on his Broadway career based on those shows.

**Speaking more generally, what fundamental differences between stage and screen acting have become apparent to you from watching Hollywood stars on Broadway?**

**Vincentelli:** One thing is confidence, the sense that the person is fully at ease on stage, and aware not only of the other actors but of the audience sitting just a few feet away. Maybe one of the reasons Julianne Moore didn't translate to the stage is that her style is very internal, very subtle, and that doesn't necessarily work on stage. I'm still scratching my head over that one and wish she'd give theater another go. Jake Gyllenhaal has a similar approach to screen acting but he's been able to handle the transition to the stage.

Stars are often stars for a reason: they have a charisma that makes people want to look at them. The best acting schools can't teach you that: You have it or you don't. When that charisma translates to the stage, it's absolutely fantastic. Examples: Emma Stone, Cate Blanchett, Denzel Washington.

**Brantley:** The essential difference between stage and screen acting is scale. The camera picks up thoughts; on stage, those thoughts have to be signaled to some degree. The old requisite that a performer be able to project her/his voice is no longer as pertinent as it was, because of artificial amplification. But this technological asset can sometimes create a disconnect: being able to keep their voices at naturalistic levels can make stars feel that their entire performance can be commensurately small. (That was more or less what happened with James Franco in *Of Mice and Men*; it was a performance that was made for close-ups.)

**Green:** There are many kinds of stage acting and many kinds of screen acting. There's also a good deal of overlap. But in general I think it's fair to say that actors trained for or mostly used to screen work develop their performances more spontaneously, less studiedly, than those trained for the stage. This is in part because of the way films are made, in small bursts and (usually) out of sequence. Rehearsal time is minimal and focused on technical issues. It might seem that, under those circumstances, actors would want to come in with a lot of deep prep work completed, but it seems that this is not usually the case. For the most part they have been cast to the role on the assumption that their native personality suits it, whereas in the theater actors are generally assumed to have a wide range and to be able to go out and find the character, not merely reveal it.

But the big difference between stage and screen actors isn't in the way they create character but in the way they project it. Without theatrical training, actors almost universally lack readability more than a few inches beyond their faces. A parade of movie stars (who weren't first stage actors) has come to Broadway and even Off Broadway completely unable to get their interpretation across the footlights. A current example is Bruce Willis, so spontaneous and charismatic on film; onstage, he seemed barely to exist, so internal was his performance. (Playing opposite Laurie Metcalf, a seasoned stage performer, didn't help.) Many actors who switch back and forth successfully describe a kind of conscious adjustment they make, as if to a set of dials in their heads. But that adjustment can't be made if there's no training for the stage in the first place. Part of that is vocal training; body mikes can make you audible but cannot fill the sound the way stage actors naturally do. Part of it is movement training. Julia Roberts was actually giving a nice performance in *Three Days of Rain* a few years back, but she did not hold the stage comfortably or have a rich enough voice. Inevitably, the stars who do get these adjustments right turn out to have been theatrically trained – recent examples in New York include Pacino, Lupita Nyong'o, Anne Hathaway, and of course Hugh Jackman.

Note that the stage and film industries in the U.S. are centered in cities 3000 miles apart. In England, of course, both industries are centered in London. British actors seem to be better trained to switch styles, whether because of their schooling or their frequent practice I cannot say.

**Cote:** In Kaufman and Ferber's comedy, *Stage Door*, screen acting comes in for regular abuse. One starlet who has gone off to Hollywood says film acting is easy; you just say the same thing over and over until you get it right. Her friend Terry Randall replies: "That isn't acting; that's piecework. You're not a human being, you're a thing in a vacuum. Noise shut out, human response shut out. But in the theatre, when you hear that lovely sound out there, then you know you're right. It's as though they'd turned on an electric current that hit you here." Although that's a comical, exaggerated view of things from 1936, there's truth to it. Actors who ply their trade primarily on closed sets guarded by whole battalions of managers, agents, crew members and so forth, are missing out on something essential. Weirdly enough, in chasing spontaneity they kill the moment. They are trying to capture lightning in a bottle. Fine, but in doing so they are letting muscles atrophy and ignoring the brilliant artifice and technique that is acting: using your voice, body, and mind to convey meaning. Seeing Katie Holmes act was watching someone trying very, very hard to stay in the moment, to force every cell of her being to engage and remain engaged. The nature of film acting is fragmentary. It breaks the body into pieces, the scene into bits, time into malleable, overlapping zones manipulated in post-production. Personally I love when films are "stagey" – *Rope*, *Dogville*, bits of Kubrick – because that is honest, calling attention to the fakeness of film, or film acting's origins in modeling.

I've seen some very poor acting from film stars. Julia Roberts seemed to be acting through a gauzy skein of her inexplicable celebrity. Of course, historically, stage divas have had monstrous fame, disproportionate to actual ability, but when a Hollywood star tries stage acting, sometimes, it seems like you are watching an amateur, which makes their stardom all the more grotesque and artificial. At least stage stars of the past had a voice, or a certain walk, or a comic shtick. Hollywood stars have a 20-foot-tall face and millions of marketing dollars. When they walk on stage, life size, and show more than a face, you are pleasantly surprised.

**Riedel:** You don't have to do a lot on the screen – just look good or interesting. On stage, you have to carry a show for two hours, eight times a week. That is not easy. And you have to memorize your lines, which movie actors like Bruce Willis can't do. He's using an earpiece in *Misery*.

**Speaking of *Misery*, are stage adaptations of Hollywood films (along with the wider "Disneyfication" of Broadway) to the detriment of Broadway's artistic development?**

**Green:** Broadway adaptations of Hollywood films are not a new thing, and they aren't necessarily a bad thing, either. For every *Misery* (which made a mediocre stage show out of a good movie) there's a *Hairspray* (which did the opposite). The problem, as always, is in the choice of material; neither excellent source material nor horrible source material seems to work well. Then, too, the adaptation has to be theatrical, not just an attempt to recreate movie magic onstage – an endeavor sure to fail. This is not just a matter of effects and transitions but of psychological placement: Does the action happen within or between the characters? Is the drama

verbal or visual? Disney is a special case, with its catalog of animated movies that are essentially stage musicals to begin with. Unfortunately, Disney has also become a model for producers looking for sure bets, which usually backfire, and for film companies looking to exploit their inventory. If these producers and film companies kept coming up with winners that wouldn't matter, but their track record is not good; I'd say one out of five movie adaptations is successful financially, and more like one out of ten artistically. Those few successes are what producers remember, and gradually this sort of content starts to crowd out the others. Broadway is self-correcting, though; when too many movie adaptations like *Finding Neverland* and *Doctor Zhivago* flood the market, an opportunity for a *Fun Home* or a *Hamilton* is opened up. The dirty truth is that there are not very many excellent musicals from *any* source floating around, hoping for a Broadway berth. At any one time there are just a few, and most of them do eventually make it, or come close.

**Vincentelli:** Broadway has always adapted: it used to be books, now it's films. It only makes sense that Broadway's evolution would parallel the evolution of pop culture. I don't see the adaptation of films into plays or musicals as a problem per se. The problem is economics that make it very difficult to take risks, not to mention high ticket prices that create a warped sense of expectations among audience members. When you pay a heap of money for a show, it creates certain expectations – you want to be “entertained.” When theater is a special occasion and not part of your regular cultural diet, the expectations are very different. If you go once or twice a year, you don't want a flawed show, whereas a flawed show can still be interesting to an experienced theatergoer (who can also think “Oh well, there's always a next time”).

**Cote:** It doesn't matter where a story comes from. All that matters is the art of those who adapt it. The Greeks used mythology and current events. The Elizabethans used European tales, poetry, and English history. And 21<sup>st</sup>-century American playwrights can take from novels, movies, pop-song catalogs, verbatim transcripts of court sessions – anything is fodder. In the case of *Misery*, it seems like a cheap attempt to cash in on the popularity of the novel – but only because the adaptation is so lame. Goldman's adaptation of his own screenplay, as I said in my review [10], is lazy and unimaginative, provoking laughs from those who know the movie, rather than any sort of terror or dread. It's camp, not horror. While he makes changes that superficially make it more “theatrical,” the stage play from *Misery* doesn't take full advantage of what the stage has to offer: dialogue. Language is theater's greatest asset and weapon. Yes, there is more purely visual theater out there (director Robert Wilson, Cirque du Soleil, etc.) but most mainstream theater is text-based. And if the dialogue isn't snappy or beautiful or powerful (as in, say, vintage Mamet) then the audience's attention will wander.

Also, Bruce Willis is abhorrent in it. Passive, inert, barely bothering to act against Laurie Metcalf's vibrant, mercurial Annie Wilkes. If the rumors of him needing an earpiece to remember his lines are true, then he has chosen dead, canned technology over the living event of theater.

But Hollywood films, for better or worse, are the lingua franca, DNA, what-have-you, of contemporary culture. The stage has always recycled cultural material, so it's silly to complain about movies being made into plays or musicals.

**Zoglin:** The growing number of plays that are based on Hollywood movies is unfortunate, in my view, simply because they almost never measure up to the originals. But I was one of the few critics who kind of liked *Misery*. It's a natural for the stage – two characters, one set – and it was nice to see an out-and-out suspense thriller onstage, something quite rare these days.

A lot of people criticized Bruce Willis's performance, and I agree that he didn't really register as he should have. But I don't blame him so much as the material: he's bedbound for most of the play, and without close-ups (or an actor of extraordinary vocal gifts), he simply can't convey the growing sense of terror and panic that James Caan did so well in the film.

**As drama critics, do you adjust your expectations or artistic criteria when reviewing star performers on stage? Should Hollywood stars be held to a different standard (be it a higher or lower standard) than Broadway actors?**

**Vincentelli:** Not really. Acting is acting is acting.

**Sellar:** When reviewing any stage production, I try to look at all the actors in relation to one another, to the play as written, and to what the production sets out to do. I don't think film actors are somehow more – or less – skilled or charismatic than actors who primarily appear on stage, though they may have visibly different comfort levels with live theater. These days very few actors do stage work exclusively and hardly anyone works only on Broadway. Most also do film, television, and various other things to cobble together a living and a career. Some might do more film, some more stage, but there is perhaps more fluidity between these sectors in general than in previous eras, so I don't really accept the binary.

**Green:** Ideally, all actors of whatever provenance are judged by the same standards. Practically, that turns out to be difficult. On the one hand there's the dancing-monkey syndrome: That the creature performs at all seems praiseworthy. This critical tendency can be exacerbated by the generally defensive, not to say awestruck, posture New York theater folk sometimes take toward stars who deign to appear. On the other hand, a distaste for carpetbagging may cause critics to underrate a movie star's perfectly acceptable (or even very fine) work. The theater community expects a certain amount of tribute from visitors to the shrine, and a certain amount of contact; if a star comes off as grand or inaccessible or just ignorant of local custom, she will probably pay for it. But she may pay for it anyway; stars who have taken the trouble to ingratiate themselves sincerely, by taking part in charity events and visiting the casts of other shows backstage and hanging out for burgers and beer at midnight, may find themselves beloved but no less panned. (Daniel Radcliffe, a great sport and quite good in *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, comes to mind here.) The underlying problem is that most New York actors, many of whom are superior stage performers, spend more time unemployed than acting. That injustice ripples up to the critical community, producing a kind of "show me" attitude, except when it produces the opposite.

**Cote:** When one hears that a Hollywood star is appearing on stage, especially if they haven't extensive experience in live performance, one worries. They're two totally different arenas for acting. Certainly your expectations are low, but you probably also scrutinize the performance for more cracks and uncertainty. So the expectations are lowered, while the intensity of gaze is stronger. Also, for any critic or lover of a culturally marginalized art form, such as theater,

there's a kind of resentment. I mean, the resentment of the ignored elitist. In short: movies are disproportionately funded and attended, relative to good theater. The theater snob (I plead guilty) cannot help but be horrified by the mountains of money spent on disposable (yet digitally indelible) cultural waste, when theater struggles for subsidy and audiences. So when a minimally talented commodity such as Bruce Willis decides to do a play on Broadway, it's rather like a line cook at McDonald's plating salmon mousse at your favorite old-fashioned bistro.

**Zoglin:** I don't have any different standards for Hollywood stars vs. stage actors. An actor is an actor, and I try to judge them all by the same criteria. I do think, sometimes, that New York critics put up resistance to movie stars with little theater experience trying to do Broadway, and thus judge them extra-harshly. In general, though, I have been pretty impressed with most of the Hollywood stars I've seen onstage and haven't seen any examples of gross incompetence.

**Brantley:** I think a reviewer has to provide context when a big star appears – which means that you consider the relationship that star has with the public and whether her or his charisma is of the same wattage on the stage as it is on the screen. But no, I don't think it's a reviewer's place to cut them slack, as if they were royalty, graciously visiting the common folk.

### End notes

1. The cliché of the all-powerful but theatrically inept movie star has become fodder for parody in contemporary backstage dramas, such as Theresa Rebeck's 2010 play *The Understudy*, and Steven Spielberg's NBC drama *Smash* (devised by Rebeck).
2. Ben Brantley (2009) "Hot Ticket: Nicole, Denzel, and Oh, a Play," *The New York Times* (30 December) <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/theater/03celeb.html> Retrieved 3 December 2015.
3. See Michael Riedel (2015) *Razzle Dazzle: The Battle for Broadway* (New York & London: Simon & Schuster), pp.401-2.
4. Similarly, producer Scott Rudin has alternated between film and theater, most recently embarking on a musical adaptation of Harold Ramis's *Groundhog Day* (1993).
5. Jerry Bauer (1982) "Jack Nicholson: The Anonymous Years Over," *Woman and Home* (May), p.52.
6. Jeanine Basinger (2007) *The Star Machine* (New York: Vintage Books), p.112.
7. See, for instance, Jesse Green (2015) "Pacino As a Stressed-Out Billionaire in David Mamet's *China Doll*" (review, 3 December) <http://www.vulture.com/2015/12/theater-review-pacino-in-mamets-china-doll.html> Retrieved 7 December 2015.
8. William Goldman (1969) *The Season: A Candid Look at Broadway* (New York: Limelight).
9. For more information, see Michael Riedel (2015) "Tantrums, Terror, B12 Shots: Inside Al Pacino's Broadway Bomb," *New York Post* (13 December) <http://nypost.com/2015/12/13/tantrums-terror-b12-shots-inside-al-pacinos-broadway-bomb/> Retrieved 14 December 2015.
10. David Cote (2015) "Misery" (review, 1 September) *Time Out New York* <http://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/misery> Retrieved 28 December 2015.

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