

CULTURE MATTERS

COVID-19 knocked actors off the Broadway stage. But are the lights dim forever?

"We have to pave a new way forward, because this industry is not ever going to be the same," one actor said.



— The livelihoods of thousands of Broadway performers were dramatically upended after the coronavirus crisis forced theaters and productions to shut down in March. Adrian Lam / NBC News

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By Daniel Arkin

Last fall, Arturo Luís Soria made his Broadway debut in "The Inheritance," a much heralded two-part play about the legacy of the AIDS epidemic and New York's gay community. Soria, who landed his part in June 2019, called the experience a "dream come true."

In any other year, the role might have opened doors for more high-profile opportunities on Broadway, where attendance last season reached 14.77 million.

But instead, Soria, 33, has spent much of the last month far from New York City. He is taking an open-ended road trip through the U.S., camping out in national parks and teaching acting classes over Zoom.

With his industry at a virtual standstill and performance venues indefinitely shuttered, Soria, who has taken to wryly calling himself a "vagabundo" (vagabond) actor, said he has no idea when he will return to New York City.

"I've watched the industry slowly disappear," he said in a phone call from Moab, Utah. "I want to be hopeful, but my gut feeling is that theater will be closed longer than we think."

Soria is one of thousands of Broadway performers – actors, singers, dancers – whose professional livelihoods and financial circumstances were dramatically upended after the coronavirus crisis forced theaters and productions to shut down in March. The situation has the feeling of a dystopian "A Chorus Line" or a three-act play with an unfinished script: No one quite knows how it will end.



— Arturo Luis Soria teaches acting via Zoom from Saddlehorn Campground in Grand Junction, Colo. Courtesy Arturo Luis Soria

Broadway is set to [remain dark until at least January](#) – a massive blow to an industry that last year contributed more than \$14.7 billion to the city's economy and supported 96,900 local jobs, [according to a leading trade group](#). New York theaters, with their crowded lobbies and tightly packed seats, are hardly spaces for social distancing.

The shutdown also spells financial peril not only for the performers, directors and lighting and costume designers, but also for enormous behind-the-scenes crews, many of whose members rely on state unemployment assistance and feel even more economically insecure now that the \$600 weekly federal stimulus benefit has expired.

In candid and wide-ranging conversations, Broadway performers described hastily patched-together backup plans, including

switching to new careers or permanently leaving New York City, and their worries about a possible "mass exodus" of artistic talent from the city.

The disruptions of the last few months have been especially stinging for performers who spent years trying to get on stage in a famously competitive and necessarily ephemeral artistic profession, only to see the curtains unceremoniously fall.

New roles, new stages

Trista Moldovan, an actress who most recently appeared as Carlotta in a reimaged version of "The Phantom of the Opera" that toured North America last year, recognized early in the pandemic that her plans for the year – auditions, seeking out new projects – would be derailed. It was a sobering realization for an artist who had spent years amassing stage credits.

"It became apparent that this would be an extended shutdown, so my husband and I had a long conversation about how we could possibly sustain ourselves," Moldovan said from her apartment in Hudson Heights, a neighborhood in upper Manhattan.

Inspired by what her mother once did to support the family, Moldovan, 40, decided to enroll in a training program to get certified as a nurse's aide – a job she hoped could tide her over until the entertainment industry got back on its feet.

— Tristan Moldovan as Carlotta in a production of "The Phantom of the Opera." Matthew Murphy

But she recently learned that she could lose the unemployment benefit she receives from the state of Maryland, where the administrative offices of her production company are based, if she were to enroll in a six-to-eight-week certification course. She now feels caught in a COVID-19 Catch-22, uncertain of her next move. She cannot continue to live solely on unemployment benefits and simply wait it out; nor can she eschew those small payments.

"It's almost like they punish you for pursuing a skill set that would presumably make you more employable," Moldovan said. "Plus, there's no guarantee of a job. I would be stepping into health care as a newbie and competing against people who have a lot more experience than me."

Moldovan's husband, Stephen Tewksbury, 49, an actor who has appeared in Broadway musicals such as "Kinky Boots" and "Miss Saigon," is also looking to make a career change, at least in the short term. He is exploring job opportunities with the U.S. Postal Service and Amazon warehouses in the region.

Art in the time of coronavirus

The vast majority of Broadway performers are not household names. For every luminary – Lin-Manuel Miranda, Idina Menzel – hundreds of other actors hone their craft in relative obscurity for entire careers.

In the wake of theater closures, those Broadway performers who cannot swiftly swing into lucrative or fulfilling ventures have felt creatively stifled, cut off from the electricity of live audiences and the embrace of a communal experience.

Christopher Howard, a dancer and actor who most recently appeared in the national tour of "Anastasia," moved in with his mother in

upstate New York when the curtain fell on Broadway in mid-March. He is grateful to his mom, but he is feeling artistically "frustrated" and concerned that he will not be able to move forward in his career.

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"I'm hanging out and teaching dance classes online a few times a week, but there's not a lot of activity," said Howard, 34. "It's a lower rate than I would usually teach for ... but I'm taking what I can get."

Other theater performers have managed to remain productive with online projects, appearing in innovative pandemic productions via videoconferencing software and other digital platforms.

In mid-May, Quentin Lee, an actor and baritone singer, appeared in the New York City-based Heartbeat Opera's virtual staging of "Lady M," a production centered on Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth that took place on Zoom. It was billed as a series of private "virtual soirées." (Lee's compensation was modest, he said.)

The experimental production was a welcome creative outlet for Lee, 32, who had been set to appear in a Broadway revival of the Tony Kushner-scripted musical "Caroline, or Change" this year, his eighth in the professional theater world.

The show was closed down on March 12, the day before it had been scheduled to open in previews, depriving cast and crew members of their opening night performance, let alone a healthy run.

— Closed Broadway theaters during the coronavirus pandemic in New York on April 8. Jamie McCarthy / Getty Images

"It was unreal. I figured maybe this would all blow over in a month or two," Lee said, referring to what has since become a global pandemic and economic devastation that stretches from Broadway to the country's network of regional theater venues, which have also dimmed their lights.

"My wife put it a great way: 'You realize it was the end of the road, not a crossroads.' We have to pave a new way forward, because this industry is not ever going to be the same," he said.

Lee, who described himself as the sole financial provider for his wife and infant daughter, said he had nearly maxed out his savings as of early August. He hopes to move into another field, perhaps sales, but he acknowledged that in whatever field he turned to, "I'd be starting at ground zero."

"It's going to have to be something that I will be able to do for the long term," Lee said, adding that he expects New York City tourism

to suffer for years to come because of the coronavirus crisis. "You can't feed a family off a wish and a promise."

Exit stage left

Lee estimates that he and his wife have two months left before their savings are depleted and they can no longer afford to live in New York. They have talked about potentially going to live with his wife's parents outside Provo, Utah.

The acting couple Moldovan and Tewksbury, likewise, are seriously considering moving to Columbus, Ohio, where her family lives. She has witnessed several friends and industry peers, faced with dwindling job options, make similar big changes in recent months.

"We've had some difficult conversations," Moldovan said. "It's isn't sustainable for us to live here. It's not sustainable for us to pay New York City rents. In the fall, we're going to reassess."

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Moldovan said her "heart breaks" over the possibility of a "mass exodus of artists" from New York City and the surrounding area, arguably the cultural capital of the country. But she is cautiously optimistic, saying she wondered whether transplants to other regions could create new artistic communities.

"I see it as a thin silver lining: There may be an extension of Broadway-caliber arts springing up around the country," Moldovan said.

She tossed out ways she could realize her artistic visions in Columbus. What if she and her husband taught an arts master class at Ohio State University? What if they put on cabarets at local venues? What if they found new creative collaborators?

"It really could change the course of the entertainment industry," she added. "Maybe another Broadway will pop up in Columbus, Ohio."



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