

The Great Diversity Way

This holiday season on Broadway, there's something for everyone

BY LIZ JOHNSON

This is not the year of the brassy Broadway musical.

Neither is it the year of the serious, thought-provoking play.

Nor is it the year of comedies, revivals or jukebox musicals.

Instead, this is the year of them all.

From sports heroes (*Lombardi*) to political activists (*Fela!*), from comedic revivals (*La Bête*) to campy adaptations (*Promises, Promises*), the variety of subjects and styles of the plays and musicals on Broadway seems never to have been more diverse.

This holiday season, on Broadway, there really is something for everyone.

Do Not Follow That Trend!

"There's absolutely no trend," says Charlotte St. Martin, executive director of the Broadway League, the national trade association for the Broadway industry. "There's such an immense diversity in types of shows and diversity for all age groups and ethnicities."

Think about it—25 years ago, you'd find just three types of entertainment on Broadway stages: serious plays, comic plays and musicals.

Now, says St. Martin, there are "small plays, big plays, jukebox musicals, serious

plays, one-man shows, one-woman shows, shows for 20-somethings, shows for 30-somethings. Used to be it was pretty much over 40."

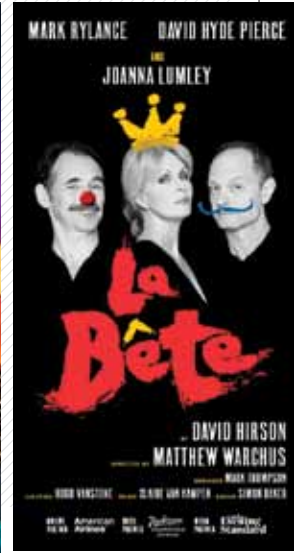
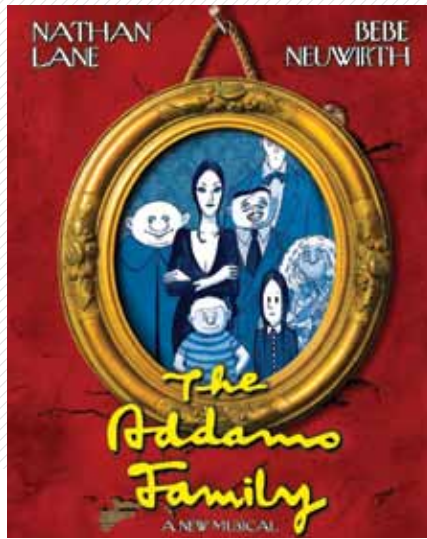
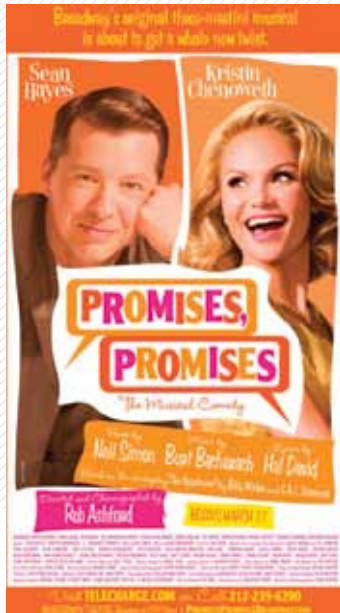
The new season has all those, plus a big wallop of star-power. Al Pacino plays Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*; Pee-wee Herman plays himself in *The Pee-wee Herman Show*. James Earl Jones and Vanessa Redgrave star in *Driving Miss Daisy*.

That diversity may be one reason Broadway is doing so well, even in an economy that is, at least when you're talking about pre-theater dinner, more hot dog than haute cuisine.

For the 2009-10 season, as of press time Broadway shows yielded \$1.02 billion in grosses, and total attendance reached 11.89 million. The grosses are up 1.5 percent, but attendance is down 3 percent from the 2008-09 season.

But wait, St. Martin says, hold on a second. There's an explanation for fewer bodies in the seats: bad weather.

"We did have a slight drop-off in attendance, but we fully account that to the rough winter we had," she says. "From a weekend standpoint, it was the worst. We lost many weekends, many of which were white-outs."



This season is shaping up to attract just as many theatergoers (or at least those who own snow boots).

If you're looking for a modern take on the familiar, *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*, one of the year's most-anticipated musicals (and, at a cost of more than \$45 million, one of the most expensive ever to produce) is slated to open Dec. 21 at the newly renamed Foxwoods Theater. The show is directed by Julie Taymor (*The Lion King*) and has new music and lyrics by U2's Bono and The Edge.

A little light Christmas cheer? *Elf*, with George Wendt as Santa, opens Nov. 14.

If the musical theater is your style, get in line for *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *The Scottsboro Boys*.

And if you're looking for something completely different? *Fela!*, which is set at the Shrine, Fela Kuti's nightclub in Nigeria in the 1970s, lures you into becoming the audience there through dance, song, storytelling, comedy and fantasy. It's closing Jan. 2—and Patti LuPone is in the production until the end—but its popularity might be a sign that shows will have the license to break the traditional rules of theater in the future. At least that's the hope of Sahr

Ngaujah, who alternates playing the lead role with Kevin Mambo.

"Historically, we learn things about the past by looking at how things 'were' done," he says. "We can understand something about our culture and where we've come from. I feel the theater should be a place for more than a museum. It's a place that should be

changed—and we should find the edge of [it] in the theater."

As the audience keeps changing, so will Broadway, says St. Martin.

"I think Broadway represents the culture," she says.

If so, surely we can expect there to be something for everyone in the years to come, too. 🍀

ARRIVE RECOMMENDS

The Addams Family

Despite a thin plot, the classic Broadway numbers (jazz hands!) and fantastic sets make for a snapping-fun show. The critics hated it, but audiences love it. Lunt-Fontanne Theatre

A Little Night Music

Stephen Sondheim does Sweden. A lovely revival. Isn't it rich? The Walter Kerr Theater

Billy Elliot

You can't help but smile at a boy who wants to dance ballet. And oh! How he dances it. Imperial Theatre

Fela!

An Afrobeat musical about politics, power and love. There's so much energetic dancing you'll be tired from just watching. Eugene O'Neill Theater

In the Heights

A fresh take on boy-meets-girl, set to rap, bachata and salsa. Richard Rodgers Theatre

Rock of Ages

If you can sing along to "Come on Feel the Noise," you'll get a kick out of this heavy-metal 1980s jukebox musical. Twisted Sister's Dee Snider recently joined the cast. Brooks Atkinson Theatre

Clockwise, right: Nathan Lane and Bebe Neuwirth in *The Addams Family*; Sahr Ngaujah and Saycon Sengbloh in *Fela!*; Andrea Burns in *In the Heights*; and Bernadette Peters and Alexander Hanson in *A Little Night Music*.



Opening, Closing and Ongoing

A Life in the Theater

Gerald Schoenfeld Theater
A revival of David Mamet's take on two actors and the changes they make as a newcomer blossoms under the tutelage of his mentor.

Bloody, Bloody Andrew Jackson

Bernard B. Jacobs Theater
An emo-rock musical about the seventh president of the United States.

Brief Encounter

Through Dec. 5 at Studio 54
The British adaptation of the Noel Coward film from 1945.

Driving Miss Daisy

The Golden Theater
James Earl Jones and Vanessa Redgrave play driver and mistress, based on the movie and the Pulitzer Prize-winning book.

Elf

Opens Nov. 14 at Al Hirschfeld Theater.
George Wendt plays Santa in this take on the 2003 Will Ferrell movie.

A Free Man of Color

Opens Nov. 18 at the Beaumont.
An epic by John Guare (*Six Degrees of Separation*) set in New Orleans at the time of the Louisiana Purchase.

La Bête

Music Box Theatre
David Hyde Pierce stars in this revival of a David Hirson comedy inspired by Moliere, set in 17th century France and written in iambic pentameter.

Lombardi

Circle in the Square
The story of the life of Hall of Fame football coach Vince Lombardi.

Merchant of Venice

Through Jan. 9 at Broadhurst Theater.
Al Pacino plays Shylock in the Shakespeare comedy.

Mrs. Warren's Profession

Through Nov. 28 at American Airlines Theater.
Tony Award winner Cherry Jones plays Kitty Warren in George Bernard Shaw's turn-of-last-century play about a daughter learning that her mother's fortune was made from prostitution.

The Pee-wee Herman Show

Nov. 11-Dec. 5 at Stephen Sondheim Theatre.
Paul Reubens brings his hyper-crazy 1980s character and his playhouse buddies to Broadway.

The Pitmen Painters

Through Nov. 14 at Friedman Theatre.
A group of British miners becomes artists.

Rain: A Tribute to the Beatles

Through Jan. 2 at Neil Simon Theatre.
Half cover band concert, half history lesson, where a live band plays note-for-note songs from throughout the entire career of the band.

The Scottsboro Boys

Lyceum Theatre
Based on the 1930s Scottsboro case in which nine African-Americans were unjustly accused of raping two white women on a freight train to Memphis. One of the last collaborations between John Kander and Fred Ebb (*Cabaret, Chicago*) and directed by five-time Tony Award winner Susan Stroman.

Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark

Opens Dec. 21 at Foxwoods Theater.
Based on 40 years of Marvel comic books. Julie Taymor directs; music by Bono and The Edge.

Time Stands Still

Cort Theater
Laura Linney plays a photojournalist who has returned from Iraq.

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown

Opens Nov. 4 at Belasco Theatre.
A musical comedy based on Pedro Almodóvar's movie.



Dan Lauria as Vince Lombardi in *Lombardi*.