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‘Gotham Refuses to Get Scared’: In 1918, Theaters Stayed Open

With an influenza pandemic and a war on, New York’s health commissioner took an unorthodox stand, declining to shutter public entertainment.

The show did go on: The 1918 Ziegfeld Follies featured Lillian Lorraine, center, with from left, W. C. Fields, Will Rogers, Eddie Cantor and Harry Keely. Culver Pictures

By Laura Collins-Hughes

July 14, 2020

War plays were big on Broadway in the fall of 1918. With the nation sending soldiers to Europe to fight in World War I, spectacles like the “Ziegfeld Follies” wrapped themselves in patriotism.

The runaway hit of the season, though, was the kind of distraction that people relish in troubled times. They flocked to see a play called “Lightnin’: A Live Wire American Comedy” at the Gaiety Theater, on the edge of Times Square.

Even as a lethal influenza pandemic took hold of the city, audiences came. Settled into the seats, they must have laughed and laughed.

Sounds dangerous to us now, right? It sounded dangerous even then. As the flu spread that year and the next, eventually killing about 675,000 people across the United States, city after city raced to contain the threat by shuttering theaters and other places of public amusement. Hollywood vowed to release no more films until the flu subsided.

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New York, defiant, kept its playhouses — and movie theaters — wide open.

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New York, 42nd Street and 7th Avenue, around 1919 or 1920. The theater season of fall 1918 was busy, with stars like Harry Houdini and W.C. Fields onstage. New York Historical Society

“Gotham Refuses to Get Scared,” an early October headline declared in The Baltimore Sun, which noted that despite 2,070 new cases of flu and 283 of pneumonia in the previous 24 hours in New York City, its health department had announced “that the epidemic has not reached an alarming stage.”

Its brief, steep spike was about to start. But quelling dismay was part of the city’s strategy — an effort to keep the public’s spirits up.

Amid our own pandemic, which since March has disrupted American life and largely paralyzed live performance, it sounds almost unreal that New York theater in 1918 simply carried on.

When I mentioned that history to Charlotte St. Martin, the president of the Broadway League, she asked, “Are you sure?”

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“It seems nuts,” she said, adding that the industry’s response to the coronavirus had been unhesitating. “We didn’t even think about it a minute. Once it became clear that this was here, the first case we got on Broadway, we shut that night. Literally that night.”

Preventing panic

Royal S. Copeland, the powerful health commissioner of New York City when the Spanish flu crept in, looked askance at pandemic responses elsewhere.

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While the nation’s surgeon general, Rupert Blue, encouraged localities to close theaters as a preventive measure, Copeland was philosophically disinclined to intrude much on ordinary life.

He also didn’t want to freak people out. “My aim was to prevent panic, hysteria, mental disturbance,” he said later, “and thus to protect the public from the condition of mind that in itself predisposes to physical ills.”

Howard Markel, the director of the Center for the History of Medicine at the University of Michigan, said Copeland “had the faith of the people” as he steered the city through the outbreak — shuttering almost nothing, including the schools. Without a ban on public gatherings, New York was “a big outlier” among sizable American cities, Markel said.

Instead of closing theaters, Copeland staggered their curtain times, assigning each to a group. The Hippodrome, for example, started at 8 p.m., the Winter Garden at 8:15, the Lyric at 8:30, the Booth at 8:45 and the Belasco at 9.

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The idea was to cut down on overcrowding. The schedule was part of a citywide plan Copeland announced in early October, regimenting the opening and closing times of various industries so that rush hours on the subways would be less mobbed.

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“My aim was to prevent panic, hysteria, mental disturbance,” Royal Copeland, New York’s health commissioner, said later. Here he is in a photograph from around 1918. Press Illustrating Service

‘Eliminate the sneezers’

In a pre-television, pre-talkies age, theater was a more everyday pleasure.

Soldiers on leave flocked to live shows; free tickets for them were seen as a necessity. “War Service Director Says No Soldier Should Lack Food, Shelter, and Entertainment,” read one headline in The New York Times.

Neighborhood theaters and vaudeville houses were scattered through the city. That fall, the number of “first-class houses” had reached a high of 45.

But while the virus lurked, some changes were needed.

At theaters and cinemas, standing-room tickets were no longer allowed; smoking wasn’t, either. Masks were not mandated, but Copeland was ruthless about the need to “eliminate the sneezers, coughers and spitters” from the audience.

Using performances as opportunities for health education, he ordered theater managers to make preshow announcements explaining the danger of infection and detailing the new prohibitions. He told them “to instruct their ushers and attendants to escort from their theaters those who violate the department rules, and to use force if necessary.”

“We will back them up,” Copeland promised, ominously. Those ushers and attendants were to boot sneezers, coughers and spitters right out.

Copeland’s militancy on that point anticipated a worry that 21st-century theatergoers cited in a survey this spring about what would keep them from returning to Broadway once it reopens: “a lack of trust that others in the audience will adhere to safety protocols.”

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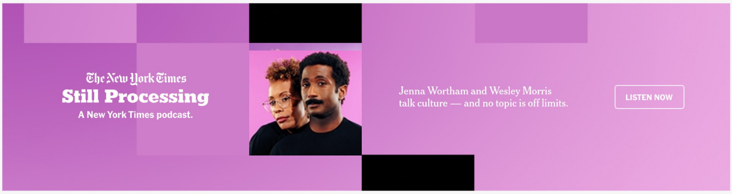

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But as J. Alexander Navarro, a historian and an editor of the online Influenza Encyclopedia, pointed out, the pull-together spirit of wartime helped coax Americans in 1918 to alter their behavior.

“It’s hard to measure,” he said in a phone interview, “but I think there was definitely a much higher sense of civic duty and nationalism and patriotism, compared to today.”

The few theaters that Copeland did shut down, quietly, were what he called “hole-in-the-wall moving-picture shows,” judged to risk infection with unhealthy air. In “the big modern sanitary theaters,” he said, he was confident of the ventilation.

How misplaced his faith was is unclear; probably, Navarro said, some people did come away infected. It would be interesting, he mused, to re-create the conditions of a typical theater, to see how far from a given seat a person’s breath would have spread back then.

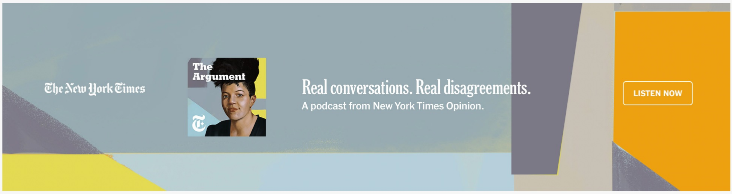
Which is just the sort of thought that flashes through people’s minds these days when they think about sitting in an audience again.

Lillian Lorraine in the 1918 Ziegfeld Follies at the New Amsterdam Theater. White Studio

De Wolf Hopper, around 1918, in a show called “Everything,” at the Hippodrome. Abbe

A virus’s swift rampage

One of the stranger things about that indelibly marked New York season is that it started busy and, apart from a period of weeks, stayed that way. With stars like Harry Houdini, Will Rogers and W.C. Fields onstage, an abundance of productions jostled for real estate, each closing making way for an opening.



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Before the flu started wreaking its havoc, producers’ biggest worry had been the proposed doubling of a hefty war tax on theater tickets — a move they tried to shame senators out of by reminding them that the enemy, the German kaiser, had at least one positive feature: his staunch support of the stage.

It wasn't until late September that The Times's Sunday drama column, What News on the Rialto?, mentioned the flu. The worry was not about bustling Broadway but about poor Boston, one of the first American cities hit by the virus's deadly second wave. Its theaters had just been closed, leaving touring companies to languish.

Only two weeks later, though, "theatrical men" were blaming a dent in some New York shows' box office on twin factors: the latest war-bond drive, which they had loudly dreaded, and the flu, which sneaked up on them. A week after that, the industry news was almost uniformly grim, with New York and San Francisco the rare "communities of consequence" with stages still open for business.

"The condition, of course, is one unprecedented in the theater world," The Times's column opined. "The slump in New York reached its high mark — or low mark — during the last six days, and even the most substantial successes had empty seats."

Then, abruptly, the crisis was over in New York. By early November, as the war ended, the virus loosened its hold on the city. By the middle of the month, with emergency rules rescinded, ticket sales headed up again, and Actors' Equity reached a new contract agreement with theater managers. (It is a curious fact that actors worked through the flu outbreak, but contemporary Equity declined to discuss it for this article.)

As the December holidays approached, the city's box-office revenues returned to glowing health.

"The same hardly applies to the remainder of the country," What News on the Rialto? added darkly, "particularly the West, where the renascent influenza germ is again beginning to play havoc."

Counting the losses

What Copeland did right, Navarro said, was to act early, employing stringent isolation and quarantine measures for the infected, enforced by what he called "a very well-funded, very efficient, well run, longstanding public health department."

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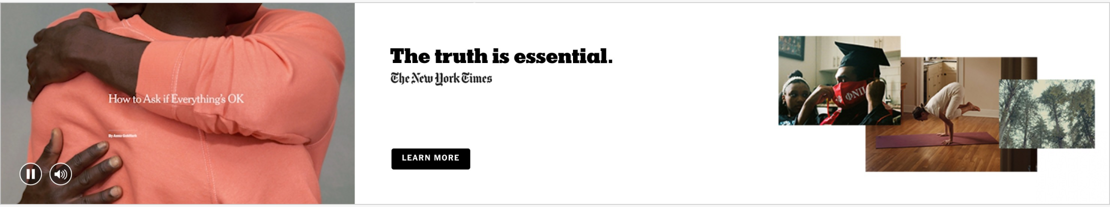

Still, more than 20,000 New Yorkers died in the influenza pandemic of 1918 — about the same number who have died in the city so far from the coronavirus.

Yet Copeland's unorthodox approach resulted in New York having a lower death rate from the flu than any other large city on the East Coast, Markel said.

"I would have closed the theaters, absolutely," said Markel, a physician and historian who edits the Influenza Encyclopedia with Navarro. "So it was kind of a bold move. But he was a very bold guy, and a very opinionated guy."

Had New York shuttered businesses and schools, Navarro speculated, it would have fared even better. "But given that they didn't bring the city's economy to a halt," he said, "what they did was very effective."

None of this is to suggest that present-day New York should have acted any differently than it has in response to Covid-19. As Navarro pointed out, coronavirus carriers can be asymptomatic — while the 1918 flu, though less contagious, ravaged its victims so severely that they were more likely to be home suffering than out mingling.

Copeland, a politically savvy homeopath who later became a Democratic senator for New York, had his own sense of what was essential to the public health. To him, it was of prime importance that people be able to “go about their business without constant fear and hysterical sense of calamity.”

And in 1918, keeping playhouses open was a way of maintaining calm.

In 2020 New York, keeping them open likely would have done the opposite. Reopening them too soon could do that, too.

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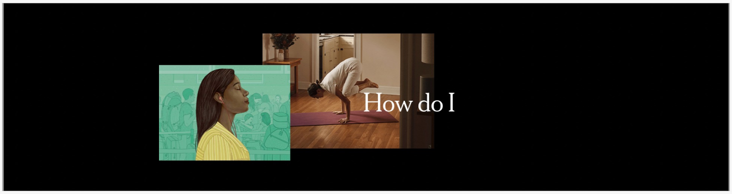

“We’d love to be back tomorrow,” St. Martin, the Broadway League president, said. “But we will never put our casts, crew and audience in harm’s way if we can help it.”

“If we come back,” she added, “we will be back because we believe that we’ve done everything we can, and that those people are safe.”

Given the brutal damage current pandemic has wrought, Gotham for now is OK with being scared.

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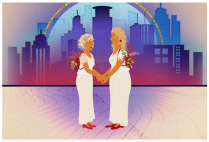

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