The New York Times

‘Godspell’ in 2020: Masks, Partitions and a Contactless Crucifixion

The first professional musical staged in the United States since theater shut down is also a de facto public health experiment.

“If this finishes and we don’t get sick, then whatever we’re doing is working,” said Nicholas Edwards, the actor starring as Jesus in a pandemic-era production of “Godspell.” Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

54

By **Michael Paulson**

Published Aug. 5, 2020 Updated Sept. 4, 2020

PITTSFIELD, Mass. — And on the eighth day, Jesus wept.

A hard rain thrummed on the roof of a festival tent. Nine masked performers, speechless, stared intently at center stage. Nicholas Edwards, the 28-year-old actor playing the Son of God, made it midway through the “Godspell” ballad “Beautiful City,” when, rising to sing a lyric about rebuilding, he burst into tears.

Sign Up for The Great Read Every weekday, we recommend one piece of exceptional writing from The Times — a narrative or essay that takes you someplace you might not expect to go.

Get It

It had been a long first week, and not just because there was so much to memorize. There were the nasal swabs and the temperature checks and the quarantining and the face coverings. And now there were tape measures to double-check distances and translucent screens to enclose backup singers; still to come were costume pockets to stash hand sanitizer.

The rehearsal halted. The keyboardist stopped playing. Edwards buried his head — pierced in one ear by a cruciform stud — under his black tank top.

“In the real world, we would come over and hug you,” said the director, Alan Filderman. But, complying with the rules of the day, he did not rise from his seat; nor did the other actors, who extended air hugs instead.

ADVERTISEMENT

Vanguard®
Active Bond Funds

Pursuing outperformance, without undue risk.

90% 3-year
92% 5-year
86% 10-year

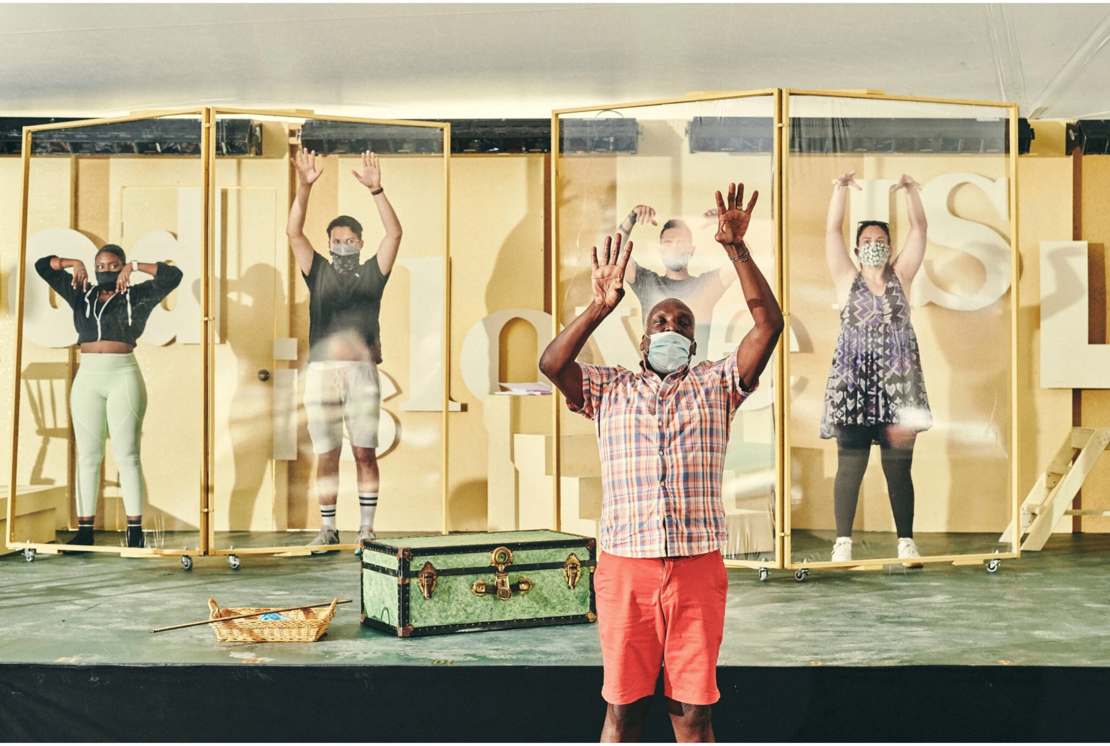
Vanguard Active Bond Funds have consistently outperformed their peer group averages.

Our investors are our owners, so our best minds focus exclusively on their needs. Deep expertise, a collaborative culture, and a repeatable investment process are the foundation of our success.

See our active bond funds
or talk to your advisor

*Performance information

Edwards took a moment, collected himself and finished the scene. “As I started to sing, ‘When your trust is all but shattered,’ that took me out, really hearing that,” he later explained. “We’ve lost all faith and trust in each other, and trust in the theater. Will it ever come back?”



The choreographer Gerry McIntyre teaches dance steps to performers shielded behind vinyl screens to hinder the transmission of aerosols when they sing. Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

The coronavirus pandemic emptied stages across the United States in March, as local officials banned large gatherings and then the nationwide theater actors’ union barred its members from performing. Now, for the first time anywhere in the country, a handful of union actors are returning to the stage — two stages, actually, both of them located in the Berkshires, a treasured summer cultural destination in Western Massachusetts.

The two productions here in Pittsfield — “Godspell” at Berkshire Theater Group, and the one-person play “Harry Clarke” at Barrington Stage Company — are de facto public health experiments. If they succeed, they could be a model for professional theater during this period of peril. But if actors or audience get sick, that would be a serious setback.

Listen to ‘The Daily’: Bringing the Theatre Back to Life

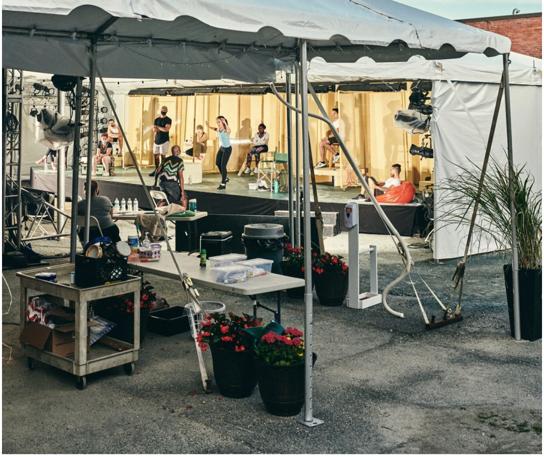
When the pandemic hit, shows across America went dark. A regional theater in New England thinks it has found a way back.

Listen 28:21

ADVERTISEMENT

In The Heights
FROM THE CREATOR OF HAMILTON
AND THE DIRECTOR OF CRAZY-RICH-ASIANS
SEE IT IN THEATERS | AND ON HBO max
THE TIME HAS COME
HAIRSPRAY
PITCH PERFECT
SIGN UP ON HBO max

“The whole industry needs this,” said Kate Shindle, the president of Actors’ Equity Association, the labor union representing 51,000 performers and stage managers. Shindle, who planned to attend the “Godspell” opening on Aug. 7, video called the musical’s actors on their first day of rehearsal with a message of encouragement, and of caution. “Not to put any pressure on you, but the entire American theater is depending on you to be really smart,” she said. “People are going to look to you to know that theater can happen without anybody getting sick.”



The Berkshire Theater Group ordinarily stages multiple shows each summer; this year, it is putting on one musical, “Godspell,” in a tent erected in the theater’s parking lot. Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

Theater, as an art form and an industry, is facing an enormous crisis.

Much of the way it has long worked — audiences packed side-by-side in confined spaces, storytelling that often involves intimacy, combat, and singing — seems to make it especially conducive to viral spread. Many theaters have pivoted to streaming, and some are putting on shows with nonunion actors, but even as other elements of society gingerly reopen, there is no clear plan for how or when Broadway and the nation’s regional theaters might do so.

That means many who depend on stagecraft for a living are now jobless. Employers — from big Broadway shows to tiny nonprofits — have lost revenue and laid off employees. Workers — from actors to ushers — have lost their income and, in a growing number of cases, their health insurance.

Equity agreed to allow the two Berkshire productions because the number of reported coronavirus cases in Western Massachusetts is low, and because the theaters agreed to implement a dizzying array of prophylactic measures for both workers and audience members. The monthlong production of “Godspell,” with 10 roles, is the more complex undertaking, because of the cast size and the perils of singing, which produces potentially dangerous aerosols.

Editors’ Picks

After 45 Years, a Cop Still Looks After His Favorite (Base) Thief

On This German Farm, Cows Are in Charge. Or at Least Coequals.

Behind Zaila Avant-garde’s Win, a History of Struggle for Black Spellers

PAID POST: BIOGEN
Living With Cognitive Decline

Tim Jones, playing Judas, dons a face shield for “All for the Best.” Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

The actors have different types (and heights) of seating in their “home bases”; Najah Hetsberger has a stepladder, which she used to relax on during a break in rehearsal. Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

The 1971 musical remains enormously popular, with nearly 10,000 productions over the past two decades. Adapted from the Gospel of Matthew, the show focuses on Jesus’s uses of parables as a teaching tool; it has been staged in many, many ways (at a refugee camp, in a prison, among homeless squatters), and this production — spoiler alert — is set during the pandemic. The visible onstage public health measures — partitions, masks, social distancing — “become part of the parable of being a moral person,” said Matthew E. Adelson, the show’s lighting designer.

ADVERTISEMENT

In The Heights
THE TIME HAS COME
FROM THE CREATOR OF HAMILTON
AND THE DIRECTOR OF CRAZY RICH ASIANS
IN THEATERS | HBO max
HAIRSPRAY
PITCH PERFECT
SIGN UP ON HBO max

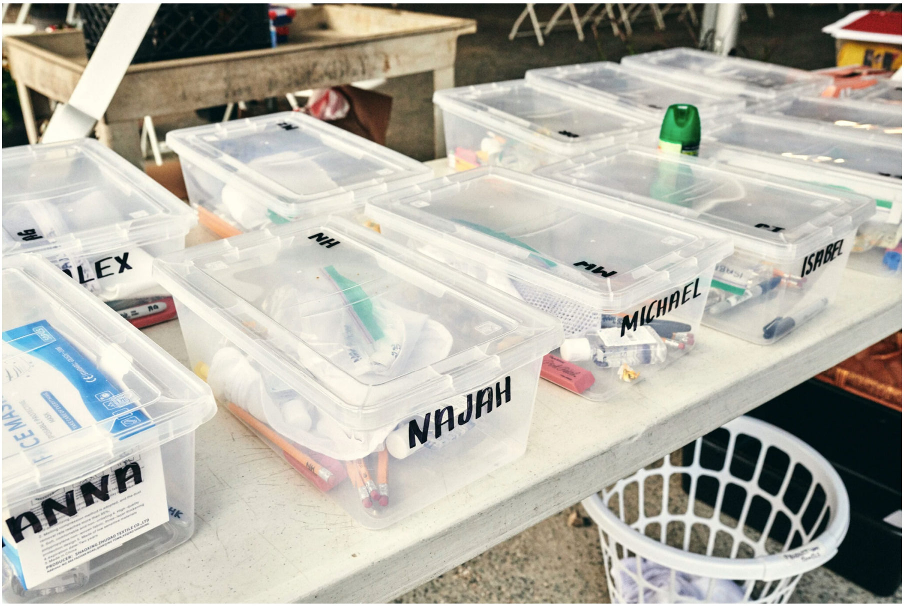
The acting company — 12 performers, including two understudies — range in age from 20 to 34. A few have Broadway experience, but most are at earlier stages of their careers. At least three, including Edwards, have had the coronavirus.

They are exuberantly grateful to be working. “I’m just so excited to perform for people again,” said Najah Hetsberger, a 20-year-old musical theater student at Montclair State University. “I haven’t done that for months.”

There are, of course, practical benefits as well. Dan Rosales, a 30-year-old who expected to spend this summer performing in the Off Broadway musical “Trevor,” said that, without this role, he wouldn’t qualify for health insurance next year. And Emily Koch, a 29-year-old who has performed leading roles in “Wicked” and “Waitress,” acknowledged, “I definitely needed the money.”

Over and over, they said they hoped success in Pittsfield would lead to more jobs for theater artists elsewhere. “This has to work,” said Alex Getlin, a 26-year-old New Yorker now spending her third summer at Berkshire Theater Group, “so more theater can happen in the rest of the country, and more of my friends can get back to work.”

But not everyone wanted to be part of this production. “They’re bold, and someone has to do it, but I don’t know that I wanted to be the guinea pig,” said Vishal Vaidya, one of three actors who declined an opportunity to be in the show. “My joke is, ‘Do I want to die doing “Godspell”?’”



Instead of sharing supplies, each member of the company was given a plastic bin with a personal stash of pencils, sweat rags and other essentials in an effort to reduce the risk of virus transmission. Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

Sanitizing props ... Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

CLOROX
DISINFECTING WIPES

... and musical instruments. Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

On the day of the first rehearsal, under an open-air tent in Stockbridge, there were rules to be learned even before the actors opened their scripts: one person in a bathroom at a time; music stands 6 feet apart; individually wrapped bagels; personal bins of Sharpies, sweat rags, and sanitizer.

ADVERTISEMENT

Vrbo
Book early

Kate Maguire, the theater’s artistic director, choked up as she offered a few words of welcome: “At this time in history, someone had to begin to tell the stories again.”

And then they began to talk. About the pandemic. About the Black Lives Matter movement. About “Godspell.”

“I’ve been alone in my apartment for four months, literally,” Filderman, 65, offered as a prompt and a confession. “I’m very nervous about my life, and my future.”

Stories, which Filderman would later fashion into a prelude, began to flow. Zach Williams, a 28-year-old Texan, had been touring in “Aladdin” when the pandemic hit. Tim Jones, 24, had just moved to New York; he returned home to Pittsfield and took a job delivering masks and gowns to nursing homes.

Kimberly Immanuel, 25, reflected on injustice. “I was sick of people staring at me as if I was the human incarnation of Covid-19 just because I’m Asian,” she said.

Edwards spoke of theater as a path through despair. “When Covid started, I thought, I’m just going to give up — I had panic attacks for days on end,” he said. “Art saved me.”

ADVERTISEMENT

A peacock Original
JOHN WAYNE GACY:
DEVIL IN DISGUISE
peacock
SIGN UP NOW

A deafening thunderstorm brought an end to that day’s rehearsal.

The costume designer Hunter Kaczorowski, left, assisted by Elivia Bovenzi Blitz, right, at a fitting for Edwards. The designers changed gloves for each fitting, and wore face shields when particularly close to an actor. Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

The show is being staged in a tent pitched on a gravel-and-asphalt parking lot beside the Berkshire Theater Group's Colonial Theater, and that's where most of the two-week rehearsal period took place.

Three mornings a week, the actors shuttled to the Berkshire Medical Center for testing. There was rarely any wait — this is a rural region — so they simply drove under a canopy, rolled down the car windows, and braced. Some shrugged, while others screamed; Hetsberger repeatedly yelled at the top of her lungs even before the swab hit her nose, saying doing so helped her endure the probe.

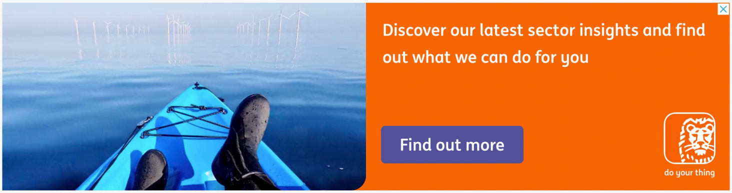
Each day there were complications (not just the virus, but also passing motorcycles, airplanes, rainstorms and bugs) and compromises.

"At first, did I imagine all these masks and all these partitions? No," Filderman said. "But I do now, and I think it's going to be really good, because it makes the actors feel safe, and it's going to make the audience feel safe."

To keep the actors apart, the wide, shallow stage is subdivided into 10 "home bases," each with a seating element of a different height: a chair, a stepladder, a beanbag. Props are limited because none can be passed from actor to actor. Pandemic humor is built into the staging — during the vaudevillian number "All for the Best," Jesus and Judas brandish yardsticks, rather than canes, and measure the distance between them.

Isabel Jordan, left, and Hetsberger study the script at a “Godspell” rehearsal. Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

ADVERTISEMENT



Discover our latest sector insights and find out what we can do for you

Find out more

The audience will be small — under Massachusetts safety standards, outdoor performance venues are allowed to admit only 100 people, including cast and crew, so the theater is expecting to sell just 75 tickets a night, at $100 each. (Ordinarily, the theater stages its biggest shows in a 780-seat house.)

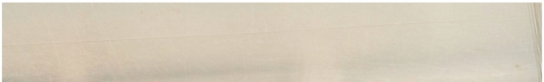
The front row will be 25 feet from the stage, in accordance with the state’s protocols for performances involving singing. (The show’s music does not require wind or brass instruments, which are also thought to pose a risk of droplet transmission.) Audience members will have to submit to temperature checks before entering; parties will be seated at social distances from one another; and masks will be mandatory.

Among those planning to brave the restrictions: Stephen Schwartz, the show’s songwriter, best known for “Wicked.” “I’m just delighted that live theater is finding a way back,” he said, “albeit tentatively and cautiously, but finding a way at all.”

The tensest moment came on the seventh day of rehearsals. It was a hot one — 86 degrees — and show’s choreographer, Gerry McIntyre, was teaching the actors the steps for Koch’s big number, “Bless the Lord.”

Jason Weixelman, in his seventh summer as a stage manager with Berkshire Theater Group, didn’t like what he was seeing. Weixelman, 40, could never have imagined that a life in the theater would involve enforcing public health protocols just devised by the state of Massachusetts, Actors’ Equity, and the theater itself. But now he was concerned that performers at the front of the stage were at risk from those at the back, and he told Filderman that the partitions they had been using to separate singers next to one another might also be needed to separate the rows.

The cast was antsy. Filderman was frustrated. “I need to know,” growled the director, who was already deep into the first act, with barely more than a week until the first performance. “We need this clarified.”



McIntyre works with Emily Koch on the song “Bless the Lord.” The translucent vinyl partitions are to protect her from aerosols transmitted by Dan Rosales, left, and Michael Wartella. Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

ADVERTISEMENT

FIND SUPPORT
FROM THE START.

GET CONNECTED

MICHIGAN.
PURE OPPORTUNITY.

Edwards, who is the elected liaison between the actors and their union, decided he was not going to wait for the creative team and theater officials to brainstorm best practices. He pulled out his cellphone and called Equity’s national headquarters.

The response was clear: Any time someone in the back row was singing, there would need to be a physical barrier between them and those in the front row. And any time actors were passing within six feet of one another — meaning basically every time a scene changed — they would need to wear a mask.

Filderman’s original conceit, in which the actors entered the stage masked, performed the show while socially distant but without masks, and then put on masks again when exiting into the offstage world, would not pass muster. “My concept for the show is gone,” he blurted out, “and life goes on.”

The first several scenes, which had already been rehearsed, would now need to be “Covid-proofed” — a phrase that, interchangeably with “Corona-proofed,” was quickly adopted by cast and crew. (Periodically, rehearsal would screech to a halt when someone yelled “Covid hold!” to raise a safety question.)

There were complications for the designers, too.

Hunter Kaczorowski, the costume designer, decided to tie-dye neck gaiters that could be used as face coverings during the show, easy to roll up and down without disrupting the head-mounted microphones.

Adelson, the lighting designer, was in charge of limiting glare off the partitions. And Randall Parsons, the set designer, managed the partitions themselves, rolling panels of clear vinyl that he called “spit guards.”

“We’re not ecstatic about this, but we’re doing what we have to do for the prime directive, which is safety,” said Parsons, who, like many of his colleagues, lost several jobs when the pandemic hit. “This is a new world for everyone. But I’m still like, ‘Oh my God, I have a show!’”

ADVERTISEMENT

is being created today
DISCOVER MORE
EUROPE
visiteurope.com
Co-funded by the European Union

Mark H. Dold is starring in “Harry Clarke,” which was planned to take place indoors, but had to move outdoors when Massachusetts decided it wasn’t ready to allow indoor theater to resume. Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

Up the road, there were major complications for “Harry Clarke” as well. The play, starring Mark H. Dold and scheduled to open Aug. 9, was to be the first Equity-approved indoor production of the pandemic. And Barrington Stage went to great lengths to safeguard the theater: upgrading its air conditioning system to improve air filtering and circulation, removing most of its seats to ensure social distancing and replacing bathroom fixtures (to make them touchless) and assistive listening devices (to make them easier to clean). But, just six days before the first performance, still lacking permission from Massachusetts to stage indoor theater, the production decided it had no option but to move outside.

That night, much of the “Godspell” cast gathered on the porch of the large house where they are isolating — mystified by some of the restrictions (why could they sit on the stage floor where others had walked, but not on chairs where others had sat?), frustrated with all the changes (why didn’t they just do a concert performance?), worried that, at any point, the show could be shut down.

Michael Wartella, an elder statesman among the group as a father and a 34-year-old with three Broadway credits, reminded the others that chaos comes with theater. “There’s always stopped rehearsals with arguments and the director and choreographer screaming at each other,” he said. “This is just a different topic.”

Much of the cast is living together in a large theater-owned house, and during the rehearsal period, they would spend evenings running lines on the porch. Bryan Derballa for The New York Times

Edwards, eating a burrito, cradling a script, and eager to get back to running lines with his castmates, listened as the conversation drifted from the legacy of AIDS to masking practices in Japan.

“We’re risking our lives, but if this finishes and we don’t get sick, then whatever we’re doing is working,” he said. “Theater needs to be saved somehow.”

Persevering in a Pandemic
How theaters around the world are trying to keep going.

How ‘Phantom of the Opera’ Survived the Pandemic
June 1, 2020

Beyond Broadway, the Show Does Go On
July 4, 2020

The Drive-In Theater: Keeping Drama Alive During the Lockdown
May 31, 2020

Michael Paulson is the theater reporter. He previously covered religion, and was part of the Boston Globe team whose coverage of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. @MichaelPaulson

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 9, 2020, Section AR, Page 6 of the New York edition with the headline: It Really Is Day by Day, in the Berkshires. Order Reprints | Today’s Paper | Subscribe

READ 54 COMMENTS

You're almost out of free articles.

Get unlimited article access for $1 a week.

Subscribe now

Limited time offer. Cancel anytime.

Suggested newsletters for you

Don't show me this again

DAILY

The Morning

Make sense of the day's news and ideas. David Leonhardt and Times journalists guide you through what's happening — and why it matters.

See the latest

AS NEEDED

Breaking News

Alerts when important news breaks around the world.

See the latest

WEEKLY

At Home

Our best suggestions for how to live a full and cultured life during the pandemic, at home.

See the latest

At Home and Away Newsletter

What to Do This Weekend

July 9

The Return of Communal Emotion

July 7

What to Do this Weekend

July 2

More in Theater

Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Hot Vax Summer? Falstaff and Shakespeare in the Park Are Ready.

July 6

Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Review: 'The Watering Hole' Can't Quite Quench a Thirst

July 3

PAID POST: NOVARTIS

Experts Weigh In on How We Can All Lead a Legacy of Better Heart Health

NOVARTIS

Daniel Efram

Theater Is in the Streets of New York, if You Listen

July 8

Colin Delfosse for The New York Times

For This Spanish Provocateur, Each Performance Is About Survival

July 4

Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

'Waitress' Is Returning to Broadway. So Is Sara Bareilles.

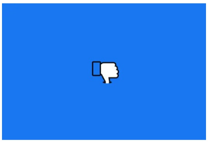
July 9

Editors' Picks

Tom Sibley for The New York Times

The Family That Buys Together Stays Together

July 10



Jesse Reed

The 'Ugly Truth' About Facebook

July 9

Lena Mucha for The New York Times

On This German Farm, Cows Are in Charge. Or at Least Coequals.

July 10

Most Popular

Could Gen Z Free the World From Email?

Opinion: The Ascension of Bernie Sanders

Who Paid for That Mansion? A Senator or the Haitian People?

Texas Man Who Waited Hours to Vote Is Arrested on Charges of Illegal Voting

Opinion: The Christian Right Is in Decline, and It's Taking America With It

Death Valley Hits 130 Degrees as Heat Wave Sweeps the West

Opinion: There's a Specific Kind of Joy We've Been Missing

The Big Question of the 2022 Midterms: How Will the Suburbs Swing?

Biden Administration Shows Little Appetite for Haiti's Troop Request

Opinion: Sorry, We Aren't Going Back to the Movies

ADVERTISEMENT

The New York Times

Modern Love

The many joys, tribulations and twists of love.

LISTEN NOW

The New York Times

Go to Home Page »

NEWS
- Home Page
- World
- Coronavirus
- U.S.
- Politics
- New York
- Business
- Tech
- Science
- Sports
- Obituaries
- Today's Paper
- Corrections
- Trending

OPINION
- Today's Opinion
- Columnists
- Editorials
- Guest Essays
- Letters
- Sunday Review
- Video: Opinion

ARTS
- Today's Arts
- Art & Design
- Books
- Best Sellers Book List
- Dance
- Movies
- Music
- Pop Culture
- Television
- Theater
- Video: Arts

LIVING
- Automotive
- Games
- Education
- Food
- Health
- Jobs
- Love
- Magazine
- Parenting
- Real Estate
- Style
- T Magazine
- Travel

MORE
- Reader Center
- Wirecutter
- Cooking
- Live Events
- The Learning Network
- Tools & Services
- Podcasts
- Multimedia
- Photography
- Video
- TimesMachine
- NYT Store
- Manage My Account
- NYTLicensing

SUBSCRIBE
- **Home Delivery**
- **Digital Subscriptions**
- **Games**
- **Cooking**

- Email Newsletters
- Corporate Subscriptions
- Education Rate

- Mobile Applications
- Replica Edition
- International
- Canada
- Español
- 中文网

© 2021 The New York Times Company