After the Curtain Falls, the Web Gets Into the Act

By Nelson Pressley
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Theater is the ephemeral art -- except, that is, when it's bootlegged on YouTube.

You can't actually watch Broadway's "Jersey Boys" online, and you can't balm the sorrow of missing out on "The Lion King" by downloading its majestic parades and anthems. Theater isn't the movies, and digital piracy isn't the kind of billion-dollar threat that has plagued Hollywood for years.

Theater buffs who'd rather click it than ticket, however, can sneak peeks on computers, catching glimpses (and sometimes more) of acclaimed performances and sellout shows.

Idina Menzel and Kristin Chenoweth have long been gone from "Wicked," for instance, but their beloved turns were preserved uploading shaky, badly focused digital footage, furtively shot and lovingly shared. "I am located in Iowa," one happy viewer of a bootleg "Wicked" scene commented online, "and have never had the pleasure of traveling to see the play. I am in love with Idina and Kristin and this made my day!"

That rave is offered despite the blurry view and the back of someone's head filling the screen as the orchestra surges, just after the theater's standard announcement: "The taking of photographs is strictly forbidden."

Few shows are as omnipresent online as "Wicked," but others -- musicals, almost exclusively -- are out there, even the best-protected among them. Mel Brooks might be the king of premium pricing on Broadway (although his "Young Frankenstein" has been on the discount rack for months), but does he know that anyone with an Internet connection can watch Sutton Foster (in the Teri Garr part) doing "Roll in the Hay" during last year's tryout in Seattle?

Of course, Megan Mullally (in the Madeline Kahn role) is also on YouTube, belting "Deep Love" at this year's Tony Awards. Shared Tony performances, like turns offered on morning and late-night chat shows, are common uploads -- the pending billion-dollar lawsuit by CBS partner Viacom against YouTube notwithstanding. (Maybe it's the paltry number of views, typically in the four digits -- although considerably more eyeballs have popped a look at Hugh Jackman's 2004 Tony turn, gloriously showboating in "The Boy From Oz.")

Still, Broadway is hardly turning a blind eye to what is being dubbed, for contract purposes, "new media."

"We're there to protect the actors and their images," says Maria Somma, spokeswoman for Actors' Equity Association. Equity monitors online violations and has succeeded in getting YouTube and Google to take down illegal performance footage. But, Somma says, "the problem is, it goes back up."

For Equity and Broadway producers, the untapped marketing potential of the Web is the other side of the issue. A comic online Tony campaign by "Xanadu" earlier this year -- the one about an adolescent named Cubby Bernstein who's a genius at theatrical marketing -- went viral, with more than a half-million hits for...
Episode 6 (Nathan Lane lost amid a bunch of nearly nude actors in the dressing rooms).

More commonly, producers create smartly edited "B-roll" footage to be used with TV reviews and on official Web sites. The "30/3 Rule" allows producers to film 30 minutes, at most, then use up to three minutes for specific instances -- never whole scenes or songs.

Should actors be paid for such usage? Should penalties be imposed when such footage mysteriously migrates from official Web sites to less-governed areas of cyberspace? This is the frontier, and the contract negotiated between Equity and the Broadway League this summer (scheduled for ratification this week) specifically allows for more marketing flexibility in the brave new world.

League Executive Director Charlotte St. Martin notes that official show Web sites are creating increasingly sophisticated content, and she says the rise in youth-oriented productions is helping to drive the change. In bygone years, St. Martin says, "you didn't have seven, eight, nine shows that appealed to audiences of 12- to 25-year-olds. And that [online] is where they find their entertainment."

Pure bootlegs are never legal, of course, but some buffs can't be stopped, and a few "Wicked"-obsessed audience members have gone to daring lengths in pursuit of their quarry. A long, loud "zzzip!" seems to confirm that a London performance with Menzel and Helen Dallimore -- filmed from a suspiciously low and unsteady angle -- was digitally preserved from inside a purse.

The most virulent strain of thesp-sharing is diva fever. Audra McDonald fans can adore her in concert (a PBS broadcast has been serially uploaded) and can catch what looks like bootleg of the four-time Tony winner with Jackman singing "If I Loved You" from "Carousel" at Carnegie Hall. Christine Ebersole, a 2007 Tony winner, was surreptitiously taped in concert singing "Around the World" from "Grey Gardens," much to the bittersweet delight of fans who will never see her performance in the much-praised but long-closed show.

"I would kill to see this musical!" one impressed viewer laments.

Foster is such an object of affection that two people sneaked recording devices into the same cabaret performance at Joe's Pub in Manhattan.

"This is not meant to be an infringement of any kind," one of the posters writes. "Sutton just rocks at the belting."

Media corporations are reportedly growing less interested in banning contraband video (shared yuks from TV, for instance) than in milking unplumbed advertising opportunities from whatever arrives online. As it is, much of the theater that's viewable through the virtual window is already legit in the form of commercials -- Lane doing 16-second spots as the bombastically profane U.S. president in David Mamet's "November" (recently closed), or teasing montages for such current Tony-winning shows as "In the Heights" and "Boeing-Boeing."

Less common, but more innovative, is the slickly produced music video for "Bitch of Living" from "Spring Awakening," with schoolboys strutting and grousing to the catchy Duncan Sheik tune. (It's the whole song, but it's "legal": The video is not straight-up performance footage, and Somma says the actors were paid through a contract with the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists.)

Of course, video has long been the place where old shows finally go to rest, with the New York Public Library's Theatre on Film and Tape Archive as a particularly authoritative repository. University libraries have increasingly sophisticated databases, too -- but why schlep to campus when you can click your way to, say, Chita Rivera and Gwen Verdon, the original Velma Kelly and Roxie Hart, doing numbers from "Chicago" on "The Mike Douglas Show"?
In less than 10 minutes, you can compare Kelli O'Hara and Paulo Szot singing "Some Enchanted Evening" from the highly acclaimed revival of "South Pacific" (on "The View" last spring) against original stars Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza (on a 1954 TV special). For the record, Martin and Pinza, posted last year, have attracted more traffic by a ratio of 3 to 1.

Ethel Merman and Judy Garland are easily available on the old Judy Garland show, but the Merman search also dredges up the Ethel Merman Experience, a dinosaur rock band in drag thundering through "Shakin' All Over," with the lead singer looking Divine in a Merman wig and red dress. The sight conjures another 1960s pop tune that sums up most computer surfing in the virtual shallows of live theater: wipeout.