Theatre fans form vital audience communities that contribute much to the theatrical event. There has been ample discourse about media fans, yet there is a dearth of research into the vibrant theatre fan audience communities that abound on Broadway. Twenty-first century New York theatre fan communities share similar practices with their late nineteenth and early twentieth century predecessors the Bowery b’hoys and the matinée girls. The guiding principles of fan behaviour considered in this article are theatre fans’ search for, and construction of, community identity through narration and translation. Fan practices that began in the nineteenth century are compared with twenty-first century practices. Broadway theatre fans emerge as communities of narrators and translators who appropriate the stories onstage and stake their ownership of stars and productions.

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In the centre of New York’s theatre district, there are invisible boundaries to delineate tribal territories. Differing fan communities occupy these landscapes and are intimate with their piece of pavement: the marquee entrance, the stage door, the screaming posters and the lights that frame their anticipation. The fans share anecdotes, digital remembrances and reminisces within their communities while they stand in line hours before the actual production waiting for tickets. This is a communal time. They may have newly branded their arm with a *Book of Mormon* tattoo. They may wear guitar picks from the original production of *Once* on a necklace, or a branded sweatshirt from *Wicked*. These symbols are a tacit reinforcement of the fans’ identity as specialists and signify their fidelity to a particular production. They ignore the novice theatregoers, the tourists, and look in disdain upon the
Hollywood star fan. Though invisible to the casual observer, the fans form a tightly knit community that communicates regularly in the virtual and physical atmosphere through tweet, text, and word of mouth. After the production they will commune again on the sidewalk and greet members of their extended community, the actors, at the stage door. Here they share quips, discuss little nuances in the performances visible only to their critical eyes, and ask for the now perfunctory signed photograph as they narrate and translate their experiences. They know this stretch of pavement well. They have visited it 40, 80, over 100 times before.

Nearly every Broadway musical and some Broadway plays have repeat attenders known colloquially by actors and ushers as “groupies” or “fans.” Some productions have “super-fans” that have attended up to 1000 performances. Throughout history, the popular press has identified and often written extensively on fans and other audience subcultures. These small, but demonstrative groups have been identified by their occupations, their attendance patterns and their behaviour: the tired business man, the stage door Johnny, the matinée girl. Subcultures were also often identified by the name of the section of the theatre that they frequented: the gallery gods, the pittites and the boxes. Even today the audience are sometimes referred to as the orchestra or the stalls. This collective rubric reinforces the communal nature of the theatre audience experience.

Theatre scholars have used various taxonomies to distinguish types of theatre audiences. Among other categories, they have been identified as random and communal audiences or accidental and integral audiences. While audiences continue to be classified under these broad and sometimes pejorative categories in theatre studies, there is a dearth of research into established theatre communities that frequent theatre events, particularly theatre fans. As media fan scholar Jenkins argues, the fan “still constitutes a scandalous category […] one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire.” This gregarious and extremely loyal community of repeat attenders now accounts for as much as thirty-five percent of all Broadway theatre visits. Broadway fans have been given little attention in either contemporary or historical accounts of theatre audiences in scholarly work.

This article argues that this vibrant group of theatregoers form communities of narrators and translators that are a vital part of the theatrical event. Since the beginnings of commercial theatre in Manhattan, theatre fans have constructed strong identities through their identification with certain star actors or theatre productions. The virtual and real relationships they form with performers extends the theatrical community across the footlights, onto the pavements and—in this twenty-first century—into the virtual atmosphere. Initial descriptions of fan audiences are followed by historical and contemporary accounts of fan audiences as communities of narrators and translators. Although theatre fans can be found in theatrical districts worldwide, to limit the purview of this research, this article concentrates on fans from the early nineteenth century onwards that attended plays and musicals in commercial Manhattan theatres.
Since the early 1800s, New York’s theatre fan communities have been notorious for giving particularly demonstrative performances almost rivalling the on-stage actors they idolise. Most notable of these are the nineteenth century Bowery b’hoys and the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century matinée girls. Similar to their twenty-first century successors, these fans were part of tight-knit communities. As Jill Dolan argues, “For some people, the community that supports the theatre is more important than the play.” Achieving a sense of belonging was as much of an incentive for fan community formation in the nineteenth century as it is today.

Fan Communities

Historically and contemporaneously, theatre fan communities have performed an important function in constructing a collective, shared and sometimes performative identity for audience members. As Cornel Sandvoss argues, “fandom has become an important part of identity construction alongside other long-standing additional factors such as religion, nation-state, ethnicity and work.” Theatre fan communities share a mutual interest in a star or production. The relational aspects of belonging to this community of fellow admirers is a central part of identity construction. Relationships with actors also play an important and somewhat complex role in identity formation and esteem building for fans.

Theatre fans also exhibit one of the essential functions of Jacques Rancière’s emancipated spectators who “appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own story” en masse. Ownership of the story, the favourite actor or the production is an integral part of community formation. As Rancière argues, the audience member “participates in the performance by re-fashioning it in her own way.” The ‘story’ is appropriated through what I call ‘re-performing’ moments or sharing mementos from the production. Re-performing occurs when fans act out moments from productions, recite or sing lines. It also occurs when fans share a treasured souvenir from a production. The object subsumes all the memories of the experience which will be re-performed each time the souvenir is viewed, used or discussed. The fans become what Rancière describes as a “community of narrators and translators.” In this article I describe how fans narrate the onstage story in their communities though re-performing. Furthermore, the fan community works together as translators to “compose their own poem” that is, as Rancière argues, just as significant as the poem composed by the “playwrights, directors, dancers or performers.” I explore how moments and memories are re-performed and poems composed before, during and after performances on sidewalks, in auditoriums, in clubhouses and, in this twenty-first century, online. While Rancière is here referring to individual spectators, this article explores how theatre fans throughout the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries have worked collaboratively as communities of narrators and translators to appropriate, re-fashion and “own” the onstage story or star actor for the purpose of creating a recognisable community identity. This not only adds a sense of social cohesion to these ‘tribes,’ but also is a postlude or epilogue to the musical or play’s story as the fans’ narrations spill out of the auditorium and onto the pavements in a kind of territorial gesture that is what De Certeau refers to as a “spatial acting out of
place.” The guiding principles of fan behaviour that I consider are theatre fans’ search for and construction of community identity through narration and translation.

**Nineteenth Century Theatre Fans**

The term “fan”—an abbreviation of “fanatic” originally used in parlance in the seventeenth century to describe religious zealots that displayed extreme and misplaced enthusiasm for religious matters—was first used in the late nineteenth century to identify sports enthusiasts. Using the term to refer to theatre enthusiasts followed shortly thereafter with the grand entrance of the matinée girl into the theatre auditorium. Before that time, theatre fans were predominantly referred to as admirers or followers.

Theatre fan communities began to emerge around 1810 at a time when the “star system” was gaining traction in the United States. The shining star actors that toured nationally and internationally all had large, fiercely loyal and demonstrative followings that often inherited the name of their eponymous hero/ine: Forrestites, Taylorites, Boothites, Kembleites. Within each of the larger fan communities, subcultures of devoted and often over-protective loyalists formed “guards” or clubs that performed their identity in various ways. The Forrest Light Guard sat in the front row of the auditorium from which vantage they attempted to protect Edwin Forrest from any disparaging comments, boos or hisses. The Taylor Guard wore a club badge and were “always armed to do combat” against “a large number of imaginary insults, of the grossest kind” that their idol Mary Taylor might receive. The British actor Edmund Kean had a large American following of Keanites, the most zealous of whom formed The Wolf Club. The imagined, and sometimes realised relationships these fan groups formed with their idols worked to strengthen their identity. Their seeming ownership of the star and the process of making the star’s story their own, strengthened their bonds with each other and constructed a role for them to play in the theatrical event.

Although most audience members of the first half of the nineteenth century were extremely demonstrative during performances, fan communities had certain practices that distinguished their behaviour. It was common practice, for example, for the fan communities to sit in the front rows and during curtain calls throw bouquets at the feet of their idols. Occasionally costly jewellery, tiaras, gold watches, American flags and cheques of up to $3000—a mammoth sum in that time—were nestled in the floral offerings. During some performances wealthier fans sitting in the boxes would beckon actors over and hand them bouquets. Fans would often initiate standing ovations. The standing ovation of this period was commonly referred to in the popular press as the audience rising out of their seats en masse and often occurred, along with other plaudits, during performances. Recitation of lines from productions was not only practised in the auditorium, but also in everyday conversation. Fans would often mimic their idol’s idiosyncrasies such as the intonation of their voices, the particular delivery of lines, their walk and their gestures, re-performing moments from the play. Matt Hill argues that this kind of mimesis can facilitate an expansion rather than a loss of the self by the imitator exploring self-
expression through what was previously alien. Re-performance strengthens the fan's community identity as they “perform” allegiance to a particular character or play. Some of the first star souvenirs emerged during the first decades of the nineteenth century such as lithographs, plates, saucers and handkerchiefs imprinted with a star’s image. These mementos were collected and cherished by fans. The privileged seating, the badges, the mimicry, the gifts and the emergent practice of collecting souvenirs worked to construct distinctive identities for fan communities.

In these cohesive communities, relationships with actors were sought and prized. Access to star actors of the nineteenth century was much less prohibitive than it is today. Apart from the standard practice of frequenting stage doors to procure an inscribed photograph or an autograph, fans had many opportunities to communicate directly with their idols through fan mail, visits backstage, and even visits to the stars’ residences. Fan mail often included costly gifts and star actors regularly received written marriage offers. Women and some men were infatuated with actors such as Edwin Booth and regularly sent them love letters: “I saw you last winter in Hamlet and since that time you have never been absent from my thoughts [...] and now notwithstanding strong opposition declare my love.” Declarations such as this, entreaties for “one glance” from their hero and confessions of undying love permeated the letters. Fanny Kemble received copious amounts of fan mail sent by ardent young male admirers and girls left bouquets of flowers on her doorstep. Occasionally fans had direct access to their idols. On New Year’s Day it was a tradition for the Olympic Theatre’s most popular actresses to receive social calls from their fans. The ladies could receive up to 600 callers on that one day. During these visits, disputes between fan communities were set aside and Taylorites would rub shoulders with Timmites and Clarkeites. These meetings worked to strengthen the fan community identity. As Northall describes, during these visits the fan communities “reserved the expression of their feelings” until the actresses’ next performance “[w]hen her appearance was generally the signal for the most unearthly yell of joy and enthusiasm which could well be imagined.”

Rivalries among the different fan communities were common. Most rivalries were innocuous and playful and occurred in the auditorium during curtain calls or in feigned jostling in the ticket line or at the stage door. On one occasion at the Olympic Theatre, the Taylor Guard’s curtain call bouquets were so lavish that admirers of two other actresses, Sarah Timm and Constantia Clarke, took it upon themselves to exceed the Taylorites in extravagance, and for many consecutive nights, so many large quantities of expensive flowers were strewn over the stage by the rival fan groups that the manager was eventually forced to prohibit the practice. The throwing of bouquets emerged as such an integral part of the theatrical event that it became a performance in itself, extending the theatrical discourse across the footlights.

Individuals within fan communities sometimes competed against each other. The pavements outside New York City’s theatres became contested sites for the very literal spatial acting out of place. Some of the most colourful documentations of demonstrative fan behaviour from the first half of the nineteenth century can be found in descriptions of queues for tickets. The
jostling for positions in the queues outside the theatres for tickets became so competitive that some fans in the lines smeared molasses and sugar all over their clothes to keep others from pushing in front of them. Those standing in the queue to purchase tickets for a glimpse of George Frederick Cooke could end up with their coat torn, a black eye, a bloody nose or snuff thrown in their faces by fans eager to secure tickets.

Friendly rivalries and bantering among fan communities occasionally turned into open hostility, particularly when British star actors toured America and when American favourites performed in Britain. There were many instances of protective fans pelting British actors off the stage with fruit and vegetables or whistling and jeering until the beleaguered actors had no recourse but to continue with a dumb show or leave the stage. This usually occurred, however, when there was an existing rivalry between actors, or if British actors behaved in a way that was seen as inappropriate or disrespectful to Americans. Fans would often go to great lengths to show their opposition by policing the tribal boundaries of their communities, particularly when the boundaries were political. The most legendary and well-documented of these episodes was the Astor Place Riots. What started as a friendly rivalry among two actors—American Edwin Forrest and British Charles Macready—evolved into a working class struggle and nationalistic dispute culminating in one of the bloodiest riots in the history of Western theatre. The Macreadyites and the Forrestites played a large role as narrators, translators and even activists in this tragic event. The “poems” each rival group re-performed and translated fuelled anti-British and anti-American sentiment.

Fans played their role in the appropriated theatrical story by expressing their infatuation in letters and journals. They staked their ownership by competing against other fan communities and standing for hours in queues to purchase tickets to gain close proximity to their idol. Ownership of star actors and their onstage and offstage stories sometimes fuelled public demonstrations such as riots. The fans formed formidable communities of narrators who, in Rancière's terms, appropriated the stories of the stars they adored and translated them into their own poems.

The B’hoys

The most rambunctious and the largest community of theatre fans were the b’hoys and their g’hal’s who frequented the commercial Manhattan theatres between 1825 and 1850. The Bowery Theatre, in particular, was their stronghold. Part of the working-class youth culture of New York City, the b’hoys were unmarried young men who lived in boarding houses in the Bowery. The b’hoys sought to distinguish themselves from the wealthier dandies who frequented the Park Theatre by wearing outlandish clothing that parodied the dandies’ preoccupation with appearances. They could be identified by their counter-cultural flamboyant dress of felt top hats, bell-bottom trousers, red flannel shirts and high-heeled black boots. They were often associated with the volunteer fire brigades that they belonged to and had their own distinctive dialect and dialogue, immortalised in a string of popular plays of the period.
starring a Bowery b’hoy called “Mose.” In this interesting inversion, the b’hoy fans’ stories were appropriated and became the on-stage theatrical story.

The Bowery b’hoys were sometimes accompanied at the theatre by their g’hals, working girls who were just as independent and colourful as the b’hoys. The b’hoys and g’hals dominated the gallery and their chorus of cheering, thumping, roaring, catcalling, whistling, stamping, groaning and declaring oaths spelt the success or demise of many actors. They often sang along with the orchestra and conversed with the onstage actors across the footlights. Indeed, actors sought and valued the “hits” they achieved when the b’hoys exchanged dialogue or communicated their approval. Celebrity gossip—the stories behind the onstage stories—was highly prized by fans. As veteran playgoer William Northall observed in 1851, the b’hoys were always very knowing about anything which was going on in front and behind the curtain, and any one of them who chanced to be acquainted, in ever so remote a degree, with any one of the performers, male or female, was considerably envied for his good fortune.

The b’hoys had two theatrical passions: Shakespeare and Edwin Forrest. They were not only narrators who re-performed moments from the plays they attended, they found many novel ways to make the onstage stories their own as ‘translators.’ The b’hoys knew many of Shakespeare’s popular plays by heart and would often recite along with the actors or prompt actors when they forgot their lines, expecting thanks for their efforts. During one performance of Richard III at the Bowery Theatre in 1832, the New York Mirror described how “an avalanche” of the audience, many of them b’hoys, jumped onto the stage and took part in the action. In addition to other antics, they formed a ring around Richard and Richmond in the fight scene and made them continue the combat for fifteen minutes, re-fashioning the story. This effusive group of fans contributed much to the theatrical event during performances. Although repeat attendance was standard practice in the nineteenth century, the b’hoys were the most frequent repeat attenders at the Bowery Theatre, particularly when their idol Edwin Forrest was performing. Forrest was more than a star, he was an American institution. As Cliff argues, “[h]is fans wanted a larger-than-life hero […] and Forrest was the genuine article.” Male fans often copied his hair and beard style and re-performed his gestures. Since Forrest came from what Harper’s Magazine editor George William Curtis called the “muscular school” of acting, the b’hoys identified with his “brawny art,” his “biceps aesthetics” and his “rant, roar and rigmarole” as it helped shape their own brawn, rant, roar and rigmarole in everyday life. Their identity was personified in the burly, impetuous figure they paid homage to night after night in the theatre and the b’hoys’ loyalty to Forrest set the tone for the star fervour that was about to sweep New York with the arrival of the matinée girl.

Matinée Girls

In the last decades of the nineteenth century the matinée girl—with her flamboyant hat, her effusive personality and her leather-bound hero book—stepped firmly in her hand—stepped onto New York City’s theatre sidewalks.
New York City’s fan culture would reach the height of fanaticism with the evolution of the matinée girl. Although small fan clubs such as the Forrest Light Guard already existed, the entrance of the matinée girl heralded the beginning of larger organised theatre fan communities.

The matinée girls were predominantly working girls who lived in tenement houses. Independent surveys from the first decade of the twentieth century estimated that between 66 and 85 per cent of the audience patrons of Broadway theatres were female. Interestingly, the 2014-15 Broadway season had 68 percent female patronage. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the only unaccompanied female audience members to be seen in theatre auditoriums were prostitutes. In what Butsch calls the de-masculinization of theatres, the inception of weekly matinées populated with women “as women” signalled a radical change in audience composition from the 1850s onwards. Women were finally permitted to attend the theatre unaccompanied by men with their reputation intact. This fact alone worked to establish a robust independent identity for the matinée girls and their communities.

Along with the re-gendering of the theatre audience came a change in play programming to suit the tastes of the matinée girl. In the first decade of the twentieth century a cultural panic ensued fuelled by the “arbiters of culture.” Newspaper and journal articles questioned the tastes of the matinee girls and alarmists decreed that “unless people of high standing in America get together to support good, respectable productions, something terrible may happen to the theatre.” Yet box office takings relied heavily on the droves of female fans that frequented the late-nineteenth century theatres, and thus programming continued to reflect the matinée girls’ dramas of choice, which were heavily romantic in content. Female fans who relished their independence formed tight-knit communities. They celebrated their identity in the auditorium and in their clubs through clichéd dialogue and gesture, fashion display and souvenir collections.

In the auditoria, the matinée girls kept up a continual narration of the onstage event and of the attributes of their idols. The matinée girls paid homage to their idol by attentive glances, unrestrained tears and hero worship. They had several names, “Matinée Millies,” “Matinée Marthas” and “Matinée Madames” and discussed their idols during performances: “Isn’t he just darling?”, “I think he’s the most handsome man I ever saw”; “It must be grand to be an actress.” The matinée girls would visit stage doors after performances to chat with their idol, stroke his costume or procure an autograph. More than any of their fan predecessors the matinée girls overtly participated in the onstage performance by attempting to live out the narratives they had created in their minds. They cast themselves as the heroine of the stories they saw onstage, empathising with every emotion their hero endured. Matinée girls often took this role so seriously that they sent scented notes called “mash letters” or violets to their idols containing propositions of marriage and arrangements for private trysts, which in the event were rarely fulfilled.

The girls not only worshipped male idols, but also star actresses. They collected and shared pictures and postcards of their favourite idols. Not only did
the exchange of keepsakes help to construct an identity for the girls, the sharing of photographs and other souvenirs was a part of the practice of re-performing. The shared memento recalls and sometimes immortalises the production for the beholders. Many of the more impoverished working women in the tenement houses, unable to attend many productions, treasured a photograph, postcard or autograph of their idol and re-performed their memories each time the item was displayed. The postcards and photographs presented the actresses in luxurious costumes portraying contemporary constructions of femininity that, as Veronica Kelly argues, catered to the “female desire for self-fashioning.”

Perhaps the most overt form of adulation and of self-fashioning was the imitation of the female star's costumes. Department stores, such as Lord and Taylor in New York, displayed all the latest onstage fashions. After seeing their idol in a production the matinée girls would purchase a version of the star's costume from these stores and then wear it to subsequent theatre performances or social occasions: thus they could be seen fashionably attired in Irene Castle's dress, May de Sousa's squirrel hat or Phoebe Foster's slippers. Some girls sketched the dresses in the auditorium during the productions. In this growing age of mass consumerism, small and large manufacturers took advantage of this growing penchant for star branded products. The Phoebe Foster nut sundae was a favourite at the soda fountain, Lillian Russell perfume was much coveted by all her admirers, and fans could even purchase a Phoebe Foster gas stove. Similar to their predecessor Kembleites, fans re-performed female stars' mannerisms and even exercise habits. When Lillian Russell took up cycling in Central Park in all-white serge with enormous leg-o'-mutton sleeves, her fans purchased replications of her cycling garments and took up cycling. The original glamour girl Ethel Barrymore had what Alfred Auster describes as a "cult following." Imitation of dress and other star branded consumer items not only constructed the matinée girl identity, but also heralded the birth of a commodity culture.

Organised matinée girls’ clubs began to form around the fin de siècle. These clubs emerged as communities of Rancière’s translators. In the clubs the girls shared stories about their idols and circulated merchandise. They often organised charity performances to raise money for causes such as earthquake victims. Munsey's Magazine dramatised an incident after a matinée performance of Bonnie Prince Charlie where “a young woman burst into her club [...] ‘Oh, girls,’ she cried, ‘I've cried three handkerchiefs limp, perfectly limp!’” In their auditorium behaviour, stage-door visits, stage fashions, and in re-performing moments from the plays, the matinée girls inhabited the world of their idols, making the theatrical narrative their own story. Similar to the b’hoys, the matinée girls were represented in songs, novels and plays of the period.

Just as the Bowery b'hoys and g'hal communities declined in the 1850s, by the outbreak of World War One, matinée girl communities had also become a culture of the past. The darkening of the auditoriums and the enforcement of theatre etiquette can be seen to have contributed to the demise of this extroverted and demonstrative community. By 1914, theatre etiquette rules in the Ladies Home Journal considered even audible whisperings during the play an “annoyance [that] amounts almost to a personal affront.” Display and self-expression were such an important part of the matinée girl culture that the
restriction of a darkened auditorium and rules that inhibited spontaneous response no longer welcomed the performances of the vivacious matinée girl.

The galleryites, groups of women and some men that sat in the gallery in the first three decades of the twentieth century, received considerable attention from the popular press. This was mostly, however, for their critiques of the plays and actors rather than their devotion to star actors. During both world wars, various star actors received adulation from some smaller fan communities. Although fan culture continued to thrive throughout the twentieth century, no other communities received the acclaim or the notoriety of the b’hoys and the matinée girls. Not only did these fan communities appropriate the on- and offstage stories of their idols, plays of the periods re-fashioned the stories of the fans. Fans witnessed themselves represented by actors on stage in characters such as the b’hoy Mose, further strengthening their community identity as narrators and translators. In this, the b’hoys and matinée girls played an essential role in the construction of the theatrical event.

**Twenty-first Century Theatre Fans**

The twenty-first century has witnessed the return of large, fiercely loyal Broadway theatre fan communities that have similar practices to their antecedents of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They too are narrators and translators that construct their identity by appropriating the stories onstage, re-fashioning them as their own. Technological changes have, however, opened up new vehicles and platforms for narration and translation and new ways of forming relationships with actors that blur the line between stage and auditorium.

The twenty-first century fans that populate the pavements outside the Broadway stage doors can be divided into two groups: those that are there to ogle at a star and those that are there to show their allegiance to a production. The former are usually single-ticket purchasers and the latter, repeat attenders. The Broadway fans whose community practices most closely replicate that of their b’hoy and matinée girl predecessors are the repeat attenders. Many of these communities are institutionalised by names that signify their identification with the production they follow: Phans (*Phantom of the Opera*), Hedheads (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*), Fansies (*Newsies*), ROA-holics (*Rock of Ages*), Q-Tips (*Avenue Q*), Jeckies and Twickies (*Jekyll and Hyde*) Hamilfans (*Hamilton*) and Rent Heads (*Rent*). What distinguishes contemporary Broadway fans from other audience members, and is either the object of ridicule or admiration in the popular press, is repeat attendance. A retail assistant manager has seen *Once* 95 times, an NYU film student has seen *Jersey Boys* 100 times and a computer salesman has seen *Cats* over 500 times. One of the earliest records of repeat attendance was a patron that saw *Hello Dolly* 75 times starting in the 1960s with Carol Channing in the title role followed in subsequent years by Ginger Rogers, Martha Raye, Betty Grable, Pearl Bailey, Bibi Osterwald, Phyllis Diller and Ethel Merman. In fact, the adherence to musicals would tend to fashion the proclivities of most of the larger Broadway fan communities.
Although contemporary fans often show allegiance to one production, they are sometimes what Jenkins defines as “nomads.” Jenkins sees fan nomads as those that move from text to text, or production to production, and in a protean sense making new meanings and forming new communities. On Broadway, these are the larger fan communities whose allegiance is to Broadway itself. One Broadway fan has seen Phantom 147 times; Les Misérables 138 times; Cats 124 times; Miss Saigon 122 times; Chicago 112 times and Wicked 94 times. Others engage in nomadic activity travelling all over the world to see their production. One fan has seen Les Misérables in London, New York, Paris, Berlin, Manchester and Sydney.

Just as in the nineteenth century, friendly rivalries exist among individual fans and groups of fans. The numbers game, as trite as it may seem, is a potent status symbol in Broadway fandom. As Rock of Ages actor Schoeffler argues “the fans compete with each other” in repeat attendance, in actor gossip and in merchandise collections. When the cast of Rock of Ages plays a friendly game of baseball with the cast of Les Misérables, the two fan communities often attend and engage in competitive banter.

The most notable difference in fan culture in this twenty-first century, is the size of the fan communities and their meeting places. Unlike their predecessors who would meet together in girls’ club houses or at the local volunteer fire brigade, the club meeting places tend to be virtual. Like the matinée girls, these fan communities are sometimes active in charity work, raising funds for a variety of different causes. Each Broadway production has at least one online fan club whose members communicate on social media in all its many forms. These clubs are self-documenting communities. Online fans often roleplay characters, extending the meaning of re-performing or appropriating the story to a completely new level. As Stacy Wolf has articulated, fans on these sites are clearly not cultural dupes. They analyse the performer's character interpretations and they compare different actor’s interpretations and voice qualities in detail. They become communities of narrators and translators that share and negotiate meanings. No longer restricted by locality, the online fan communities are global, not only populated by often thousands of members, but also opening up new possibilities for sharing different stories about intercultural performances. Social media has also re-defined communications between actors and fans. Fans regularly communicate with actors through those that have Twitter accounts. Twitter has emerged as a new virtual stage door. Relationships with other actors and among members of fan clubs continue to be a vital part of community formation.

Although some of the meeting places have changed, fan auditorium behaviour has not changed dramatically over the century. Fans continue to covet front row seats. Since seating is now assigned—a change that occurred in the twentieth century—some fans sit in the same seat for the multiple performances they attend. This habitual practice is not only a form of “spectatorial” speech act, but is also an avenue for extending the community conversation between cast members and audience. During a performance of Once the mandolin player in the first number inclined his head and mouthing a question at a regular fan sitting in her customary seat. A fan that had seen Hedwig multiple times sitting in the
same seat was escorted to this seat on her 400th performance by a cast member. To celebrate the occasion a seat cover had been specially stitched with her name inscribed in fuschia-coloured glitter.83 During these occasions the lines separating the ushers, cast members and fans become blurred, extending the larger theatrical community into a kind of a communitas.

Fans often envision themselves as “part of the cast.”84 Some fans wear the costumes of the onstage characters to the multiple performances they attend. In the last Broadway revival of Les Miserables a fan attended numerous performances dressed as Cosette, completing her story appropriation with what is contemporaneously now called “stage-dooring”: visiting actors at the stage door to retrieve an autograph predominantly on a Playbill.85 Fans also bring props and other paraphernalia into the performances extending the diegetic world of the play into the auditorium. They are sometimes gifted with props or set pieces from the production on its closure. While gift-giving of bouquets, jewellery and gold watches strewn on the stage at the curtain call is no longer practiced, fans will often gift cast members with unique and often more personalised treasures. One Cats fan sketched cartoons of each cast member which he sent backstage. On the closing night of Rock of Ages a number of fans pooled their money and designed and wore custom made shirts, gifting each cast member with a shirt.86

Re-performing moments or experiences from the production is regularly practiced. Like the b’hoys, the fans know every line in the production. They often have their own language made up of catch phrases from their show or snippets of songs that are narrated in their twenty-first century club rooms: the Broadway sidewalks and the digital airwaves. The phenomenally successful Broadway musical Hamilton has some of the largest numbers of contemporary fans. These fans form part of a “hamdon”—a community of Hamilton fans. Hamdon members, many who have not even seen the sold-out musical, regularly communicate, narrate and translate their interpretations of the production from the vast research they conduct on the musical. Fan fiction and fan art continue the narrative of the production, extending the theatrical event across the digital airwaves. The pavement outside the theatre and the stage-door, normally the tribal territory of the fans, has become a new site for performance as cast members give small performances of the play for “hamdom” fans that have been unsuccessful in procuring a ticket in the nightly Ham4Ham lottery.87 The sites of performance are spilling from the stage onto the Broadway sidewalks.

Sometimes a souvenir from a production is a catalyst for re-performance. The purchasing of merchandise is a means of extending the eudaimonic pleasure of the theatrical experience. The practice of souveniring that began in the nineteenth century with single purchases of lithographs or handkerchiefs has grown to immense proportions. Many fans have large collections of production souvenirs and merchandise. Souvenirs can be the regular merchandise from the production or souvenirs and even large set pieces that have been gifted from actors. One fan, who saw A Chorus Line around 100 times, has a sizeable collection of souvenirs, the largest of which is the original marquee from the 1970s production.88 Playbill collections can number into the thousands. Each time the playbill is shared with others, the memories are re-performed and the

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*Popular Entertainment Studies, Vol 7, Issue 1-2, pp. 39-54 ISSN 1837-9303 © 2016 The Author. Published by the School of Creative Arts, Faculty of Education & Arts, The University of Newcastle, Australia.*
story is owned. Compared with practices in the past, contemporary souveniring generally seems to favour quantity over quality.

Over the past two centuries Broadway fan practices have not changed in essence, but the communities have new meeting places and use new vehicles of expression for narrating and translating the stories they see on stage. In 2016 the first Broadway fan conference was held with 5000 fans attending despite a major blizzard. This was an extraordinary community gathering of fans from all shows joining together in one place. Some things do not change: fan communities are still territorial, extremely loyal and effusive. They still relish the opportunity to re-perform memories through the display of branded souvenirs, reciting lines, moments and backstage gossip. Although their communications with each other and actors now include the digital airwaves and the virtual stage door, gifting and friendly rivalry is still practiced. While their clubhouses are now online or the Broadway auditoriums and pavements, Broadway fans still seek a sense of place and belonging. Interestingly, one of the maxims for the 2016 Broadway fan conference—“There’s a place for us”—wistfully captured this search for belonging and identity. It is primarily the sense of community that worked and continues to work to construct unique identities for the Kembleites, the b’hoys, the Phans and the Fansies.

Contemporary theatre fan communities have strong identities and play an important role in the theatrical event through their repeat attendance, auditorium and pavement behaviours and their relationships with actors. Theatre fan communities in the twenty-first century are constantly expanding. Future research into theatre fans would include studies of fans in different cultures and the emergent globalisation of theatre fandom. For many, the community they belong to that supports the theatre is more important, or is at least as important as the play. The Hamilfans that have not even seen the musical collaborate with other fans online to weave metatheatrical narratives that extend the play's narrative. The hamdon is a vital community that is at least as important to its members as the production. Online discussions and group attendance at the productions work to create interpersonal bonds within the communities. Shared experiences at events that are re-performed and translated after the event heighten the eudaimonic pleasure of the event. This was true for some of the b’hoys and matinée girl communities and it remains true today. In a society where many are virtually connected but no longer have a physical communal meeting place, fan communities provide a safe environment for theatre lovers to celebrate their enthusiasm, speak a similar language and draw a little closer to the warmth that emanates from the star productions on Broadway.

1 One super-fan has seen Rent over 1000 times. Suzanne Corbonne “No rest for the Wicked devotees as musical rolls back in town,” The Age, 19 April 2014.
2 Since the inception of commercial theatres in New York, newspapers and magazines have published various articles on New York fans, or included a discussion of fan behaviour in the content. From articles in The American Atheneum, Spirit of the Stage, New York Times, Mirror and
Theatre Magazine in the nineteenth century that discussed the behaviour of the fashionables, the gallery boys and the matinee girls to twenty-first century articles in the New York Times, Daily News, Playbill and The Examiner that discuss the antics of the superfans and repeat attenders, fan behaviour has always been a topic under regular discussion in the popular press.


5 For the first time since its inception in 1984, the Broadway League's annual demographics 2013/2014 publication included the category "Broadway fans." The report stated that "The small number of dedicated Broadway fans who attended 15 or more performances in the past season comprised less than 5% of theatregoers, but accounted for 35% of all theatre visits (4.2 million admissions).” Karen Hauser, The Demographics of the Broadway Audience (New York: The Broadway League, 2014), 32.


7 The entertainment district of New York was originally situated in lower Manhattan and only moved to midtown around 1850.


11 Rancière, Emancipated Spectator, 13.

12 Rancière, Emancipated Spectator, 22.

13 Ibid.


15 See Oxford English Dictionary, sv. “fanatic.”

16 Jenkins, Textual Poachers, 12.


18 In the first decades of the nineteenth century most of the star actors in New York were imports from London (Dudden, Women, 28).

19 William Knight Northall, Before and Behind the Curtain (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1851), 70.

20 Audience members would regularly whistle, stamp, roar, catcall, wave, sing, boo, and talk back to the stage. See Caroline Heim, Audience as Performer: The changing role of theatre audiences in the twenty-first century (Routledge, New York: 2016), 46-64.

21 Walt Whitman contemptuously described the auditorium behaviour of fans of the “much trumpetted people,” the star actors, who would “crush each other to get a sight of some flippant well-puffed star.” Brooklyn Eagle, 8 February 8 1847.


24 Dudden, Women, 40.

27. The original Olympic Theatre, which stood at 422 Broadway, was built in 1837 and was burnt down in 1854.
33. There are numerous accounts of similar receptions to American actors by British fans on their British tours.
35. Much has been written about the Astor Place Riots so I will not concentrate on them here. For a particularly noteworthy account of the rivalry between the two actors and the rivalry between their two fan groups see Nigel Cliff, *The Shakespeare Riots* (New York: Random House, 2007).
36. The Bowery Theatre, which was built in 1826 and demolished in 1929 (after many fires and rebuilds), was located in the Bowery district of lower Manhattan. The Bowery was considered a theatre catering for the working wo/man.
37. The first Park Theatre located in lower Manhattan opposite City Hall Park was built in 1798 and was demolished by fire in 1848. The Park was considered a theatre for those from a high socio-economic background.
43. Books with pictures and quotes from theatre idols.
45. For more on what this change meant for the theatre see Butsch, *American Audiences*, 72.
52. Heim, *Audience as Performer*, 132, 133.
Popular plays included *Tilda's New Hat* (1908) and *Our Miss Gibbs* (1910).

As was the stage-door Johnny, the male equivalent of the matinee girl who formed a smaller group than the girls.

Butsch points to the sacralisation of the arts as one of the primary reasons for this decline. See Butsch, *American Audiences*, 61-63.


The research on twenty-first century fans undertaken for this article predominantly draws from personal interviews with Broadway actors and ushers. These in-depth interviews (15 with Broadway actors and ushers) were originally undertaken for the author’s book *Audience as Performer: The changing role of theatre audiences in the twenty-first century* in 2013/14. The book includes a brief section on Broadway and West End fans. Additional statistical and anecdotal information is taken from further email correspondence between the author and Broadway actors and ushers, and from fan websites.

The number of Broadway fans has been steadily rising since the inception of the megamusical in the 1980s and the invitation for audiences to play a more participatory role in the theatrical event.

These fan names have been sourced from various newspaper articles, internet sites and from the author's interviews with actors, audience members and merchandise managers in 2013 and 2014.


This was one of the earliest records of repeat attendance that I could find from my research.


Paul Schoeffler (Broadway theatre actor), personal interview, 28 April 2013.


The author became part of one of these online communities for a time. Fans were eager to share their stories and engage in friendly, and sometimes not too friendly rivalry with each other.

Wolf, "Wicked Divas," 45.

Janet Fullerlove (West End theatre actor), personal interview, 20 July 2014.


Paul Schoeffler (Broadway theatre actor), personal interview, 28 April 2013.

Ibid.

These accounts are taken from interviews conducted by the author in 2013/14 with actors and from Broadwayworld.com.


Broadway Con took place on 22-24 January 2016 at the Hilton Hotel in Midtown Manhattan.