

Retiring the Mockingbird: On cash grabs, Scott Rudin, and the search for better theatrical programming



I used to have a joke I'd make whenever somebody would tell me their theater needed to raise money fast.

"Well," I'd say, "you could always do *To Kill a Mockingbird*."

Sometimes when you deal in the commodities of art, things can be both profound and profitable, and you grapple with whether the profitability somehow taints the profundity.

When it comes to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, there seems to be an immunity in place that protects the source material from the fact that, while many people who produce it *do* love it or the book it's based on, there is no denying that it might be the most sellable play on Earth. It's probably more sellable than most musicals. It often sells out runs as soon as its announced and gives subscription numbers a bounce, and every time that happens, the theaters producing it like to pretend that it's not the *Mockingbird* factor, but something having to do with them specifically and how good their production of the show is going to be.

If you haven't already, now might be when you begin to wonder why I'm talking about *To Kill a Mockingbird* at this particular point in time.

There are a few reasons.

One of which is the ongoing nightmare of disentangling the theater industry from Scott Rudin.

Rudin's relationship with *Mockingbird* is fraught to say the least. I have a version of how this all went down that is mostly speculative, so if you read on, please be advised that this is all opinion, and not actual journalism. It's barely an OpEd.

But here it goes-

For years, there was a licensed version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* that was done all over the country and probably made the playwright and the licensing company an ungodly fortune. Was it a great adaptation? Eh. It's fine. Literary adaptations rarely rise to the level of "passable," and it was certainly passable. It got the job done. And it must have banked more money than I will ever see in my life. The adaptor is Christopher Sergel, and with all due respect to him, he's not exactly a theatrical titan.

All this is to say, it's pretty easy to see an opportunity there to make even more money than was previously made with this halfway-decent adaptation written by a little-known playwright.

In walks Rudin.

He essentially commissions a *new* adaptation from Aaron Sorkin. (You know what *might* have been cool? An adaptation from a Black playwright, but hey, asking too much I guess.) He then gets into a lengthy legal battle with the Harper Lee estate regarding the adaptation, and he prevails, I'm assuming, because he has more resources at his disposal than the average country.

This is when I stress to you that we did not *need* another adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and we certainly didn't need one from Aaron @\$\$%-ing Sorkin. The one that existed was not great, but fine, considering which audience it's targeting. This was a money grab using a title that has already evolved into a money grab for the theater industry.

But the fun doesn't stop there.

Rudin then proceeded to go on a kind of mafioso litigation tour across the country, shutting down the pre-existing, pre-licensed productions of Sergel's version. It was like organized crime if it were being organized by Moss Hart. I couldn't believe it. How could Rudin survive this, I thought. He's bullying small theaters. The logic was that he wanted the version on Broadway to be the only version. I can only imagine how Sergel felt about this. After all, he had gotten permission without any bullying tactics, and Rudin had to take the estate to court and now wanted no other version to exist.

Then, as a sort of ... concession (?), Rudin offers to let the theaters whose productions he had just shut down do the *new* version of the show. You know, the one that puts money in his pocket. The press release announcing this was one of the most audacious things I have ever read. It's like robbing someone of their hundred dollars, then giving them euros back, and telling them they should be grateful, because euros are kind of cool, right? I mean, sure, you have to go re-rehearse your show, scrap all the previous advertising, and produce a version you probably haven't even read yet, but aren't

you lucky, because this is the *Sorkin* version. Now, say, "Thank you," to Mr. Rudin, and back away slowly. He doesn't like any sudden movement.

How Rudin was allowed to get away with this is beyond me. Of course, now we know he's gotten away with a lot worse, but most of that was at least partly done in the dark. This was all in full public view. And while people were angry, more than a few of them kowtowed and produced the new version. I don't blame them. It was the easiest course to take.

What really boiled me up was seeing the main production open on Broadway, and not only become a major hit, but receive critical acclaim. I remember telling a friend that I thought it was shameful that Rudin was able to weather all that bad behavior, and they countered that the people in *Mockingbird* shouldn't be held accountable for what he'd done. I agree with that, but the reality is that the show's success was not only Rudin's success, but a sent message to everyone who had witnessed what he'd done, and the message was-

Rudin can do whatever he wants.

And it speaks to a disconnect that exists between audience and artist that we are going to have to deal with sooner rather than later as we move toward reopening and try to deal with problems within our field.

Mainly, that audiences don't seem to care how the food gets made as long as it's tasty.

Remember years ago, when Actors' Equity tried to get audiences to care about how many tours were pivoting to non-equity by kicking off the "Ask If It's Equity" campaign? The premise was that if audiences understood the difference between the two, they'd advocate to see more equity tours in their hometowns and cities.

Survey says?

Nope.

Turns out, audiences, for the most part, cannot tell the difference between equity and non-equity. It becomes like inside baseball to them. An issue that exists in the weeds, when all they want to know is how much the ticket costs and can they take their little nephew to the show and how long is it, because they don't like to drive at night.

They want to see *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and you are not going to make them feel bad about it.

That's not an argument to just produce what audiences are going to be comfortable seeing. I'm always a champion for cultivating an audience and moving them in more interesting directions. I'm just not sure it's possible to do that by explaining to them what was going on behind-the-scenes, because ultimately, that doesn't affect them, does it?

Oh sure, there are wonderful, empathetic audience members who want to know that actors are being treated right and nobody was picked on and everybody is having a great time, but I'm not sure there are enough of those people to fill a blackbox, let alone a Broadway house.

Audiences in New York have known who Rudin is for years the same way the industry has, and they still went to see productions where his name was above the title. The only reason we aren't holding them

accountable is because an “audience” is as spiritual a thing as a poltergeist. It would be like holding air pollution accountable. It just doesn’t work.

That disconnect is also why it’s going to be hard to reopen with an eye on audience comfort in regard to safety, because we haven’t figured out how to create a channel of communication with them, but that’s an essay for another day.

Today, I’m thinking back on what I’ve written about what “better” looks like when we come back, and it has me thinking about cash grabs like *Mockingbird*. There’s nothing wrong with doing shows you know audiences are going to like, and depending on your financial situation, it might just be necessary, but here’s my question–

If students have been reading *Mockingbird* in school for years as I did, and theaters have been producing *Mockingbird* all over the country, as my college did and two theaters I’ve worked with, then when do we start to wonder if the message of *Mockingbird* is actually getting through to people?

What is it that people are reading and watching, because when a pivotal moment in the book and the play feature the line, “I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand,” and yet we’re still living in the world we’re in, you have to wonder if maybe we need to start getting our point across using somebody other than Atticus and Gem.

Every time a theater produces *Mockingbird*, somewhere in the ad copy the phrase “The story we need now more than ever” appears in some form, and while it may be true that we *need* the story, I’m wondering if, due to no fault of Lee’s work, it’s not making the kind of impact we’re telling people it is.

Instead, I think it’s become this inoculated story that presents a white savior and a story about fear and racism that is very easily digestible, to the point where bigots can sit quite comfortably in a cushy seat in an audience and try to remember their reservation time at the fancy restaurant across the street.

Before you hop in the comments and suggest that I’m talking about canceling *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I’m not. It’s still one of my favorite novels, but I think it’s always been asked to do too much, and it’s certainly a product of its time. I’d never suggest not reading it, but I’m not sure it should be the *only* thing you read that addresses the themes found in the book. More often than not, when it’s produced in a theater, it’s as political as that theater is willing to go, namely — not far enough.

And time after time, they get a pat on the back for producing something so *brave* and *important*. The liberals cry and the conservatives yawn, and the details of the production tend to be forgotten shortly thereafter by everybody except the people who worked on them, who conflate that warm, fuzzy feeling of being in a hit show with having been a part of something *special*.

I once produced a version of *Tartuffe* that was so offensive three people got up and walked out.

Do you know how hard it is to offend an audience with *Tartuffe*?

That, to me, was special.

I feel bad about the snark in that last part, but I’m not editing it out, and I’m not making room for exceptions where, yes, I’m sure some people have worked on *Mockingbird* and had their lives changed the same way some people can work on *Starlight Express* and achieve Nirvana. Anything is possible, but

we're not here to talk about exceptions.

The monetization of stories like Harper Lee's masterpiece should be most offensive to those who claim to care about the work. The way artistic directors will rattle off a list of plays that cost next-to-nothing to produce with guaranteed profit and then give interviews about how much those same stories mean to them has moved beyond distasteful. It's become boring and the boredom shows up first in the work.

The expectation pre-pandemic between large-sized theaters and their audiences had devolved into, "*You produce something I've heard of, read, and seen at the movie theater, or I'll cancel my subscription. Oh, and make sure the lead guy looks like Gregory Peck or I'll express my dismay at the talkback after telling you all about how the actors weren't loud enough.*"

There is no coming back to that if what we're striving for is "better."

What we do when we're in a good place as theater organizations and institutions is not a reflection of who we are. That reflection appears when we need money, when we're trying to sell tickets, when we need good reviews, or when we want our audiences to clap politely and not complain that we've become too woke.

The best of who we are exists in what we're willing to leave on the table in search of better titles, better stories and better people to tell them.

Barely any of them will sell as well as *To Kill a Mockingbird* will, or *The Glass Menagerie*, or *The Tempest*, or *Steel Magnolias*, or dozens of other plays that we keep behind a glass and break in case the last show moved fewer tickets than we thought it would.

People like Rudin know where we keep our emergency stash, and they know how to use the popularity of those titles to advance themselves and their reputation. They know that even when we think we're getting a lesser version of a story, we'll still go if it's a story we have some sort of emotional or sentimental attachment to, and we'll complain about it later if we have to.

The solution is to come up with better solutions.

It's about doing the hard thing even if it means accepting that a loss might be inevitable.

That's something I learned from a book about a lawyer, his daughter and bravery.

You should read it sometime.