

Inside Stories: All the World's Not a Stage Transcript

Scott Simmie: Some enchanted podcast, that I am the host of. Today we are joined by a guy named Bob Martin, he knows lots of stuff and none of it's fluff. So don't go away, please try to stay for Bob Martin and me. All right. Thank you for indulging me. I'm Scott Simmie, and I promise for most of this program at least, to never attempt to sing again.

Scott Simmie: Joining me today is Bob Martin. Bob's a writer, he's an actor, he's a comedian and he's often working on projects that are slated for Broadway in New York. So Bob, welcome.

Bob Martin: Oh, hi. I'm happy to be here.

Scott Simmie: I'm really happy you're here as well. Listen, maybe we could start with you telling us just a bit more about what you do, and perhaps you might even mention a project or two you've been involved with, that listeners might recognize.

Bob Martin: Well, I'm Canadian, I was born in England, but raised in Canada, and I really made my living making television in Canada. I made a series called Slings & Arrows, that had some infamy I guess, it's still talked about to this day actually. It was a show about the goings on, and a large not-for-profit theater that was based on Stratford.

Bob Martin: I've done many things in Canadian television, but in the early 2000s, I was involved with the show called The Drowsy Chaperone, that ended up... Started at The Fringe of Toronto, and ended up going to Broadway. And it had some success on Broadway, won five Tony Awards, and I was suddenly relabeled in a way, as a Broadway book writer, which was an unusual thing for me at the time, because it was the first musical I'd written. I had been involved in the theater at Second City, and doing plays in Toronto, but I hadn't really been immersed in musical theater. But that's where the work started to come.

Bob Martin: And since then, I've had a total of three shows on Broadway, and written while I was, Drowsy Chaperone and Elf and most recently The Prom. And I'm involved in probably the development of seven other shows that involve people like Alan Menken, David Yazbek, David Foster, Harry Connick Jr. It's been a really, really wonderful and fulfilling career turn that I did not anticipate. So that's kind of where I am now.

Scott Simmie: I did not know that about The Drowsy Chaperone, that it initially was on Fringe, and then wound up getting to Broadway from there. That must have blown your mind, did it?

Bob Martin: Yes, it did. It started even more humbly than that. It started as a kind of stag party gift from my friends, to my then wife, Janet Van De Graaf and I. And it was performed at the Rivoli in Toronto, as a sort of 20 minute, half-hour kind of fake 1920s musical. And we took that material and developed it into the show that ended up on Broadway, and in the end, it's been all over the world, now that show, it's been in Tokyo, it's been on Australia, it's been all over the world, still performed every day somewhere, although not now because of the pandemic.

Scott Simmie: Well, we're certainly going to get to the state of the stage in a moment. But I looked up your bio on Wikipedia, and I was kind of surprised to see that you... At least it didn't appear to show me that you'd been involved with theater until you were in your 30s, and getting involved with Second City, is that correct? Were you sort of late to the game?

Bob Martin: I'm late to the game in everything in my life, so that's probably accurate. I kind of all the dates have blurred together in my mind. I mean, I studied theater at the University of Toronto, but I

went right into sort of television writing. Theater was in parallel to that, but TV was how I was earning my living. I was also acting, I was doing a lot of acting, and that's how I paid for university and everything. But then Second City was kind of a big change for me, and yeah, that would have been in my late 20s or early 30s. And that kind of, that's when I really fell in love with performing, and improvisation, and comedy, and that was a big life-changing event as well.

Scott Simmie: Oh, that's awesome. Now you divide your time between Canada and the US, and particularly New York city. So where were you when things began to lock down, and what was that like for you?

Speaker 3: I think I was... When things started to get bad, I was actually in Cleveland because I was attending an event to announce the inclusion of *The Prom* in the season at a theater in Cleveland. And we started to hear terrible news stories about how this virus was spreading, because it began on this single case, I believe in January, and then by, I guess early March, it became a dangerous thing.

Speaker 3: I returned to New York city, turned out to be the last flight I would take for quite a while, and I remember that it was the day of the opening of *Six* on Broadway, and I was supposed to go to that opening. And hours before, the opening was canceled. And that was highly unusual, I've never heard of that happening before on Broadway. And we realized that this was going to be sort of a cascading event, and that all the theaters were going to close, and that the industry would then shut down. So that's sort of my memory of it. It was deciding whether or not to go to the *Six* opening, and then finding out that it'd closed. There was also, we found out that several people in the cast of *Moulin Rouge* on Broadway had tested positive for COVID, and that was making everybody very nervous. I think it was that, that actually led to the cancellation of *Six*, and then the closing of all Broadway theaters.

Scott Simmie: Now, the closing of all Broadway theaters is... I hate to use the word again, but it's truly unprecedented. What's going through your mind, and the minds of performers, and other people involved in the industry, that you're in contact with when this happens?

Bob Martin: Well, as you say, it was unprecedented. So we didn't really have a way to process this. You have to understand that this shows Broadway is unusual. There's only about 40 theaters, but the budgets for these shows are comparable to the budgets of major Hollywood films. So a single day of a theater being closed, costs a fortune for the people involved. So to have something shut down just before it opened, is just devastating. So again when this cascade happened, we realized that several shows would not survive even a week of being closed. And that has proved to be the case. It's hard to say how many shows will open again when Broadway finally does open, but at least 30, 40% will not. It's just not financially possible for them to re market their shows and bring back the same company and everything, especially if we have to reopen in a compromised manner.

Scott Simmie: And do you think when some of those shows close, that's it forever for that show and Broadway? I'm just thinking what that might be like, if I were the person who wrote that, or I was the person who was planning to direct it, or I was a person who had a lead role in that, what that would be like?

Bob Martin: Yeah. It would be a no Broadway ever in most cases, just because of the complex financing and scheduling and availability of Broadway theaters, it's kind of like landing on an aircraft carrier. You have a limited number of opportunities, sometimes you have to wait years before a theater becomes available. So, when it's completely disrupted like this, it can sink a project. The other thing is, and this is been the major point of discussion for everyone in the community, is what will people want to see once we come out of this? I mean, the zeitgeists changed dramatically in the moment the pandemic hit. So we're trying to anticipate what people want once we get out of this terrible situation.

Scott Simmie: Because I don't work in Broadway, I don't know whole lot about it. So I started trying to just drill down and find some numbers about it, and I could not believe how big a deal it is as a business. I'm just going to read a couple of stats, which I'm sure you're familiar with, but there are nearly 15 million seats every year, that are sold for Broadway productions, that Broadway brings in more people than all of New York and New Jersey's 10 professional sports teams combined, contributing nearly 15 billion. That's where there be to New York City's economy annually, and something like a 100,000 direct jobs. So this is a really big deal when this gets just ripped out of the heart of the city. Is it not?

Bob Martin: Yes, exactly. Yeah. Because Broadway isn't just a performance at APM, it's also a family coming into town, staying at a hotel, having dinner, paying for parking, going to see The Empire State Building and all of this. It is a huge influx of money into the economy, so that's all gone. And restaurants will close as a result, we all know restaurants that have closed. I don't know about travel and tourism that was hit just as hard as the theater was, I believe. So yeah it's really, really devastating.

Scott Simmie: Now unfortunately, Broadway is a type of industry that relies on people in close proximity to one another in the same way that that sporting events do. But with sporting events, as we've seen now, they're attempting to relaunch these with sound effects and empty stadiums, but that isn't really something we can do with the Broadway production. Is it?

Bob Martin: I don't see how it's possible. I mean, there's again the financial concerns, so if you're talking about social distancing in a theater, then you're talking about a theater that's probably at a third of its capacity, which would normally close the show, that alone. The thing I'm most worried about is the musicians in the pit. There's just no way to get any distance between musicians in a pit. And people are blowing into instruments, I mean, it's just a very... It's a little cesspool at the best of times. And then theaters are not huge luxurious spaces that the wings are very crowded, you have a lot of craftspeople and close intimate contact between the crafts people and the actress themselves. It's really hard to imagine how it can open normally. I think of this whole problem as two phases.

Bob Martin: Think of COVID as a natural disaster, where a city sort of infrastructure is destroyed, how can you get back to some kind of compromised morale boosting situation? That's phase one, right? So, something with a third of an audience, and the performers were in plastic visors, some horrible thing. And I have seen photographs of productions, where the actors are doing that. Sure, that's something that's kind of a token to say, we will be back in full force at some time in the future, but then, the real return is when we are.. Well when I say we, I mean, the United States really is in a situation. New Zealand is in, where it is completely managed the virus, and there's a vaccine that's widely available and cheaply available, and life is just safe again. What is interesting to me, is then what will people want to see.

Scott Simmie: What do creative people who are involved with Broadway do when all of this is shut down? What are you doing?

Bob Martin: I'm doing a lot of zoom. I can tell you that... We're doing a lot, we're planning out our shows and keeping them alive as much as we possibly can. A few of the productions I'm involved in have kind of stopped completely, stopped the development process completely. A few others, we were at a stage where we could continue writing and composing, and so we're using this free time to really dig deep into the material. But the actual work of making theater, of being in a room with people, with actors, we can't do any of that. So, as I say, incremental development, no money nobody's earning anything because all the tours are over though. So all the royalty payments are gone, the salaries are not coming in. It's really, really devastating for people in my business.

Scott Simmie: Has the government in the United States, either at the state or local or federal levels stepped up and provided any assistance?

Bob Martin: Well, I'm not an expert in this, and my situation is unusual because I'm both Canadian and a resident of the States. And just through the grace of God, I happen to have a really good year last year. So even if there were any support from the government, I wouldn't qualify for any of it. But I did talk to a bunch of other people I was working with on several different shows, nobody knows of anything that's coming from the American government to help actors.

Bob Martin: Certain producers are extending healthcare coverage and everything for their employees, companies like Disney have held off furloughing people as long as they possibly can, but ultimately, there's no money coming in. There's no help. And it's something that I know, that the producers and other professionals, who are in a position of control on Broadway are really quite angry about, because as you say, we bring in so much money and yet we're not helped when things go terribly wrong. I think it's maybe it's considered elitist or something Broadway, but it really isn't, because it's all about restaurant workers and parking lot attendants and all of that.

Scott Simmie: As you point out, it's such a massive economic engine. And I guess I also wonder, like what happens to an actor who was ready to go on stage and suddenly has no stage upon which to perform? You mentioned some of these organizations like Disney, they're trying to avoid furloughing people, but are other people who were slated to be in productions, are they've simply cut loose and looking for other jobs right now?

Bob Martin: Well, yes. I mean, I know a lot of people who are actually leaving the business because when you can't gather for theater, then you can work. So they're going back to school, or trying to online, trying to... It's a huge step back. I mean, actors are living on by a thread in the best of circumstances normally. It's really why I became a writer and producer, because I couldn't stand the uncertainty of being an actor. So if you're a young dancer, in the chorus of mean girls or something, and suddenly the theater closes down with no opening date, you can't do anything, you can't earn money with your skill set that you worked so hard to develop. And being a dancer, there's a limited timeline anyways. Like being a professional athlete, you have a small window where you can really show what you can do. So yeah, for these people, it's a terrible, terrible thing.

Scott Simmie: Now COVID-19 has obviously been the biggest thing that's happened to any of us here for well, about a century, but we've also seen the Black Lives Matter movement, and that's been reverberating through many sectors as companies, and institutions reevaluate how they perform and their own historic policies. Has there been much discussion of this in the theater world?

Bob Martin: Yes. There's only two things that we're talking about right now. It's black lives matter and COVID-19.

Scott Simmie: And what's the discussion around black lives matter in the theater?

Bob Martin: Well, that's a very complex question. I mean, basically, people like me, an older privileged white guy, I'm re-examining my prejudices and things that I've consciously or unconsciously done in the past. We're looking at the makeup of our creative teams and how we cast shows. These were all things we thought about before and talked about quite a bit in the past, but now we're looking at it through a new lens with guidance from community leaders. I had a really, really interesting discussion about colorblind casting yesterday with a casting agent in New York. Colorblind casting is a term that refers to not seeing race when casting a show. So for instance, if you did a production of Lear, you could have a white Lear with a black Cordelia or anything like that.

Bob Martin: There's a movement away from colorblind casting to something called color conscious casting, where you start to take in the ramifications for a particular character of being a particular race. And that of course is the way we should be writing, that is just good writing. If you have a black character, you have to understand what it's like for that character to operate in the world. But it's

problematic when you're dealing with a property that already exists, like Lear or something that takes place at a period of time when people of color would not be present in the room, like something that took place in the '30s or something with in Hollywood, which happens to be a show that I'm working on.

Bob Martin: So these conversations are extremely sensitive and thoughtful, and we're looking for guidance, we're attending workshops, and yeah, we're really reevaluating. It's crazy. It's the second revolution that's happening on top of this crisis. But the black lives matter inspired revolution, is a very healthy one and long time coming. So I think we're all going to be in a better place eventually. It's so much of this is coming down to semantics, we have to understand that we have to define the terms and understand the language that we use going forward.

Scott Simmie: We've seen theater tackle some really difficult events before, and turn them into works of hope and even inspiration. I'm thinking for example of the AIDS epidemic, that we saw some productions that were massively powerful and inspiring. What about this pandemic? Do you think this is going to become source material for future productions? Or do you think people will be so sick of it, as you alluded earlier that they are just like, you know what, I don't want to hear anything about COVID-19.

Bob Martin: It's really hard to say. Again, that's why I went back to that book by John Berry. Apparently, not like... I mean, do I want to see someone's one man show about his experience living in New York during the pandemic? No, I do not, because I lived it, right? I have no interest in seeing that.

Bob Martin: I mean, maybe some perspective at some point, or maybe a comic take on it, maybe I would be interested in that. I can only really speak for myself. I don't want to say anything about COVID. I mean, I guess I would, normally as a writer, I dig into what is on my mind and what I'm experiencing. So maybe I'm maybe I'm wrong about that. Maybe somebody will come up with the Angels of America version of the COVID pandemic, and that would be a healing and wonderful. But my instinct is that people will want to escape a little bit.

Scott Simmie: At the moment, Broadway is closed until early 2021 I believe, and of course, things could change between now and then, maybe that could get moved forward, but more likely it might get moved backwards. Any sense on how long it might take. And again, I know I'm asking you to predict here, but how long it might take for Broadway to get back to normal once it finally does reopen?

Bob Martin: Well, the last discussions that I was part of, that was about I guess about three weeks ago, we were talking about March of next year, when certain major shows will open. So what that would mean, is that we would need to begin rehearsing in January, February. So people would have to be able to gather in a rehearsal space a few months before that opening date. Subsequent to those conversations, there's been a terrifying surge in the number of cases in the United States. So I would not be surprised if that date were pushed, because yeah, because what people have to remember is that it's not really about March. It's about January.

Scott Simmie: When this podcast first began, we were kind of at the height of the initial spread of the pandemic, and there was no way I was going to go to a store and buy a bell. So I got myself a little drinking glass, and that sound indicates that we are heading into the rapid fire round section.

Bob Martin: Oh no. Okay.

Scott Simmie: Yes. Oh, yes. So I'm going to ask you maybe four or five really quick questions. I'm just looking for quick answers. First thing off the top of your head. Are you ready?

Bob Martin: Is that a question? Yes.

Scott Simmie: That is a question. Excellent. Number one. What's your favorite Broadway production?

Bob Martin: That I didn't write?

Scott Simmie: Yes.

Bob Martin: I really enjoyed Band's Visit.

Scott Simmie: And that you wrote?

Bob Martin: Well, I have special affection for Drowsy Chaperone obviously, but The Prom has been a really wonderful experience in my life.

Scott Simmie: What do you like best about New York city?

Bob Martin: I would say the coffee shops. I write in coffee shops.

Scott Simmie: Hot dog, hamburger or something vegetarian?

Bob Martin: Something vegetarian. I'm old, I have to be careful.

Scott Simmie: What show or movie really makes you laugh?

Bob Martin: There are certain Woody Allen films that I still have great affection for, although it's become harder and harder to fund even his early work, but yes.

Scott Simmie: And what are you really looking forward to doing that you can't do right now?

Bob Martin: Walking in the upper West side. Yes, that's down Riverside park. That's what I love to do, and I would love to do that and look up and not see people wearing masks. That's what I'm looking forward to.

Scott Simmie: Bob Martin. Thanks so much. This is a great conversation. I appreciate you sharing your Inside Story today.

Bob Martin: Thank you.

Scott Simmie: I'm going to watch that show right out of my hair. I'm going to watch that show right out of my hair. Hey, wait a sec, I'm bold. Thanks for tuning in again, I'm Scott Simmie, and this has been Inside Stories.

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