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Broadway Actors: What Sparked Their Passion to Act Onstage?

Broadway is a huge part of the culture of New York City. Almost everybody from New York City, or those visiting, have seen a show. After seeing a show, the names of the actors and actresses will never be forgotten. When we think about these actors and actresses, we always think about the present, we never focus on the past. No one ever thinks about what influenced these talented people to pursue a career in theater. Behind every actor and actress, there is a very unique story of how this passion was sparked. No two stories are alike.

Being an actor on Broadway sounds pretty easy at first glance, but not many realize just how much time and work goes into this job. Their lives revolve around the show. An actor's schedule for a certain day will be made based on what time the show is that day or night. Depending on their makeup process, some may need to arrive at the theater much earlier than others. Aside from the one day a week when there is no performance, they'll go through the same routine every day.

In New York, Broadway actors' salaries range from \$26,063 - \$708,331, with the average at \$137,346. The minimum an actor earns each week is \$2,034. Since apartments in New York City are so expensive, 27.32% of their monthly salary will go towards rent for their apartments/housing ("Broadway Actor Salary"). Along with paying rent, actors also have to use their salary to purchase food, home goods, hygiene products, etc. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for Broadway actors to be unable to make ends meet.

There are many factors that go into an actor's salary. These include: Fame, show popularity, experience, and their role in the show. When actors don't come in on a show day, whether it be sickness, or anything of a similar nature, they do not get paid that day. The understudy that goes on for this actor will receive additional pay on top of their regular salary. There are many different types of understudies. These include: Understudy, Standby, Alternate, and Swing. All of these performers have other onstage roles in the ensemble except for standbys. Standbys are always offstage, and they only cover the principal role(s). According to MentalFloss.com, "They literally stand by. They're required to be at the theater, and in some cases, within a certain radius of the theater, to be on call if a principal role is unable to perform." There are times where understudies will know in advance if/when they'll be going on. This is in instances of vacations. This gives them more time to prepare for the role. However, there are some instances where they get notice that same day. This is due to illness or other similar circumstances.

Those who understudy principal roles can get an additional \$54.50 to their weekly salary. Swings understudy multiple ensemble tracks. They can earn an additional \$101.70 (Playbill.com). A lot of the time, actors have to look for other jobs in order to make ends meet. These are commonly called "survival jobs." Survival jobs are "jobs someone takes in order to pay the bills while pursuing a career they love." Some common survival jobs are: Waiting tables, Babysitting, Private acting/singing classes, and Uber driver (Hundt).

The Actors Equity Association is the labor union that represents Broadway actors/actresses. According to Playbill.com and the Actors Equity Association website: "for actors not from the area, the Actors Equity Association will provide them with apartments and housing. The association requires the apartments to have the basic amenities and necessities

available for the actor/actress. The actors are provided with transportation in order to run errands and get to and from the theatre in some cases. The Actors Fund offers services to find affordable housing for Broadway actors.” Based on all these hardships, one might wonder, “Is it all really worth it?”

The process of being cast in a Broadway show can be very long. A college degree is not required to be eligible to act on Broadway. However, actors with a Bachelor’s degree might have a better chance of being hired in some cases. On your first audition, you usually don’t get a callback. It can take many auditions before you get cast in a show, especially the popular ones. When you do get cast, it is a very long and strenuous process. This is especially true for brand new shows. The rehearsals for a show are very long and intricate. A typical rehearsal period for a Broadway show is about 6-8 weeks. However, there may be shows that require longer. A lot of the time, directors and producers expect you to be off-book (all lines memorized) even before rehearsals start. During these rehearsals, there can be many scene, lyrical, and line changes, which can be challenging. Rehearsals continue even when the production is running. Actors are always adapting to significant changes.

Despite all the rehearsals and practicing, actors can forget their lines, they’re only human. I have experienced this firsthand. On October 29, 2021, I saw *The Phantom of the Opera*, and Bradley Dean, who plays Monsieur André, messed up one of his lines a little bit. There was a little pause, then he said the line. (If you weren’t familiar with the show, it wasn’t really noticeable. However, I know the lines to the show really well, so I noticed). The line was supposed to be: “I think we have made quite the discovery with Miss Daaé” but instead, he said: “I think we have made quite the (pause) experience with Miss Daaé.” Some line mishaps like

this happen on occasion, but don't happen that often. When actors forget their lines, the other actors onstage will usually help them out by using improv, and ad-libbing.

On average, Broadway actors perform in 8 shows a week. A usual week will include 6 single show days and 1 two show day. The two show days are usually on either a Saturday or a Sunday. Actors' daily lives revolve around what time their show(s) is/are that day. Being a Broadway actor is very unpredictable. Salaries can fluctuate each year, earning more or less than the previous. After they conclude their run with a show, most of the time these actors have no idea when/where their next opportunity for work will be.

When it comes to preparation for a show/role, this varies greatly. Some shows as well as roles may require much more preparation than others. Actors' interpretations of the character may also influence how they prepare for the role both mentally and physically. One actor who sticks out to me when I think of this is Ramin Karimloo. The first show Ramin starred in on Broadway was *Les Miserables* from 2014-2015. Ramin played the main character, Jean Valjean. During his interviews, the interviewer almost always asked about how he prepared for this iconic role. Ramin said he got his interpretation of the character from the book which the musical is based on. Ramin explains how the book describes the character of Valjean: "of medium stature broad shoulders prime of his life." Ramin goes on to say "I was like jeez I'm not in the prime of my life. So I thought I'm gonna work out, get strong and feel like I'm in the prime of my life." Ramin would go on to get personal training, and started bodybuilding for the role. He gained 20 pounds of muscle! Since this role, Ramin hasn't given up this lifestyle, but has since shed some of these pounds so he can walk around "normally" as he puts it. Although I have not heard of many other Broadway actors going as far as Ramin went, it is very interesting to see how these actors make the character their own.



(Ramin during rehearsals for Les Miserables after starting his training)

It is very common for Broadway actors and actresses to start off as a child. Being a child actor on Broadway can be a very difficult feat to accomplish. When a show has children in the cast, they will cast 2 or more children to fulfill the role. These children will alternate the role on a schedule. For example, in Les Miserables, there are 3 child roles: Gavroche, Little Cosette, and Young Eponine. The show will cast 2 actors for Gavroche, and 2 actresses for Little Cosette and Young Eponine (Young Eponine is a silent role, so the Little Cosette actress not on that night will go on).

Along with fulfilling the duties of an actor, child actors also have other responsibilities. Although they are working, they are still required to get schooling. In order to fulfill this, some child actors will continue to attend their school during normal hours. For others, they will get homeschooling or online schooling. These young actors have to juggle their schoolwork with a show, sometimes not being able to finish their homework until very late in the evening after a

performance. As for pay, the children in Broadway shows will make around \$1,900 a week (Reid). Despite this, the child actors enjoy what they do, and most importantly, they have fun pursuing a career in their passion.

As a child, being cast in popular musicals can build quite a reputation. There are many popular actors and actresses out there who began their careers on Broadway. Some of which have since moved away from Broadway, but others have continued to perform onstage. Some famous actors/actresses that were on Broadway as kids include: Nick Jonas, Ariana Grande, and Gaten Matzarazzo.

Nick Jonas began his Broadway career at the age of 9. The shows that he was in include: *Annie Get Your Gun* (Little Jake, 2001), *Beauty and the Beast* (Chip, 2002), *Les Miserables* (Gavroche, 2003). Jonas returned to the Broadway scene in 2011 in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Nick has also starred in the West End Production of *Les Miserables* as Marius in 2010. He only performed for 3 weeks. Nick also starred in the 25th Anniversary Concert performances for *Les Miserables* (2010). Since then, he has not acted in a Broadway show, but is currently producing a show, *Chicken & Biscuits*. Ariana Grande began her Broadway career at the age of 15. The show she was in was: *13* (Charlotte/Patrice, 2008-2009). Since then, she has not acted in any Broadway show, but has been casted in the *Wicked* movie adaptation as Glinda. Gaten Matarazzo began his Broadway career at the age of 9. The shows that he was in include: *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (Benji, 2011) and *Les Miserables* (Gavroche, 2014-2015). Outside of Broadway, Gaten also appeared in the *Les Miserables* US Tour as Gavroche, in 2013. Since 2015, Gaten has not performed on Broadway, but stars in the Netflix show *Stranger Things* as Dustin. Nick Jonas and Gaten Matarazzo both performed in *Les*

Miserables, one of the most popular shows in Broadway history! These three are just a few of many actors/actresses who started on Broadway, then became big stars later on.



(Nick Jonas, Ariana Grande, Gaten Matarazzo)

Everyone has a passion. How everyone finds theirs is very different and unique. My passion for musical theatre started at a very young age. I saw my first Broadway show when I was just 4 years old. I saw a matinee show of Disney's The Lion King on October 24, 2007. Upon experiencing live theater for the first time, I became very intrigued. Seeing a Broadway show at such a young age sparked a newfound passion in me. Since 2007, my shows of interest have grown into many shows. I have seen a total of 4 different shows so far: The Lion King (twice), Wicked, Kiss Me Kate, and The Phantom of the Opera (twice). Although my passion led me to join and act in my high school play in 2019, I don't think acting will ever become a profession for myself. Despite this, I won't turn down any opportunity to work in the theatre industry if one comes my way.

Behind every actor and actress of any age, there is a very unique story of how their love for the arts emerged. When you ask Broadway actors/actresses how they found this passion, you won't get the same answer twice. That is the beautiful thing about theatre. It affects everyone differently based on sole perspective. I have become very interested in what in fact inspired these

talented individuals to do what they do. Why did they decide that performing on Broadway was what they were meant to do? What was that defining moment that made them feel like theatre was for them? In order to get these questions answered, I've interviewed both a current and former Broadway actor and actress. I have asked them: "What was the defining moment that sparked your passion to act on the stage?"

One reply I got was from Demaree Danner. Demaree isn't currently on Broadway, but she's focusing on her solo music career. Her theatre credits include: *Les Miserables* (Young Cosette/ Young Eponine: Broadway), *The Secret Garden* (Mary Lennox: US Tour), *Big* (Cynthia Benson: US Tour), and *Wicked* (Nessarose: US Tour). Demaree began her acting career as a child. Her older brother is Braden Danner. Braden began his acting career as a child as well, and was in the Original Broadway Cast of *Les Miserables* in 1987. Braden played, and originated the role of Gavroche. When I asked Demaree what the defining moment was for her, this is what she said. "I was a four year old little girl sitting in a rehearsal hall in New York City watching my brother in rehearsal for the original Broadway production of *Les Miserables*. When I heard the music and the cast building a show, I knew I had to be a part of it someday! Donna Vivino was Young Cosette, and I wanted to be just like her. Frances Ruffelle was Eponine, and my little heart just fell in love with storytelling through music. Then once the barricade was being built, and I got to see the sets and costumes all together with the lighting and full orchestra, I was hooked for life. I had to wait four years before I finally auditioned and got the role of Young Cosette" (Danner). For actors and actresses who have a sibling go into musical theatre as kids, it is very common for the sibling to take it up as well.



(Demaree outside the Imperial Theatre where *Les Misérables* played)

Another reply I got was from Ramin Karimloo. Born in Iran, Ramin now resides in England. Ramin isn't currently on Broadway, but he will be returning in March, 2022 to open the Broadway Revival of *Funny Girl*. Ramin began his acting/theatre career at the age of 18, performing on cruise ships. As well as musical theatre, Ramin has also been focusing on his solo songwriting career, as well as acting on TV and in films. He has released four solo albums over the course of his career. His theatre credits include: *The Pirates of Penzance* (Police Officer/Pirate and Pirate King; UK Tour), *Les Misérables* (Jean Valjean, Marius, Enjolras, Feuilly; London), (Jean Valjean; Toronto) (Jean Valjean; Broadway), *The Phantom of the Opera* (The Phantom, Raoul; London), *Miss Saigon* (Chris Scott; UK Tour), *Love Never Dies* (The Phantom; London), *Prince of Broadway* (Tokyo), *Murder Ballad* (Tom; London), *The Secret Garden* (Archibald Craven; Lincoln Center), *Evita* (Che; Tokyo/Vancouver), *White Rabbit Red*

Rabbit (Broadway), *Anastasia* (Gleb Vaganov; Broadway), *Chess* (Anatoly; Washington D.C./Tokyo), *Doctor Zhivago* (Yuri Zhivago; London), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Judas; Tokyo), *Rumi: The Musical* (Shams Tabrizi; London), *Sunset Boulevard* (Artie Green; UK Tour) (Joe Gillis; London). Ramin has also performed in the 25th Anniversary Concert performances for *Les Misérables* (2010) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (2011) which were both released on DVD. Ramin is a Tony Award and Olivier Award Nominee, as well as a Theatre World Award Winner. In 2019, Ramin became a recurring character in the British soap opera *Holby City* as Kian Madani, which was his first big TV role. He departed the show in June, 2021.

When I asked Ramin what the defining moment was for him, this is what he said. “Watching great films and great actors who I wanted to emulate. It was more a culmination of things. Then once I started acting, the more I learned, the more I wanted to try” (Karimloo). In other interviews I’ve watched and heard, Ramin has given credit to his idol, Colm Wilkinson for striking the acting passion in him. When Ramin was 13 years old, he went on a school trip to see *The Phantom of the Opera* in Toronto, Canada. Colm was playing the Phantom at that time. Ramin described his feelings when seeing Colm’s Phantom: “Oh my God, this was unbelievable. I want to do that, that's kind of cool.” Ramin would skip school just to go see Phantom, and talk to Colm Wilkinson at the stage door after the show, asking for advice. He bet his friend that he would become the Phantom, and years later, it came true. At the age of 13, Ramin knew he wanted to play the Phantom one day. He worked hard, and it became a reality. Since then, he has performed in the 25th Anniversary Concert for *The Phantom of the Opera*. Ramin is one of the most well-known Phantoms worldwide.



(Ramin's various roles throughout his career)

The next actor I'd like to highlight is Ben Crawford. Ben was born in Arizona, but is currently living in New York. Ben is currently on Broadway, playing The Phantom in The Phantom of the Opera. Ben has been playing this role since 2018. As well as musical theatre, Ben has been focusing on his solo singing career, releasing his first album this past October, *Ben Crawford's Electronic Pandemic*. He has also released a Christmas album this December, *A Crawdaddy Christmas*. His theatre credits include: *Les Miserables* (Courfeyrac, Champmathieu, Brujon, Jean Valjean u/s, Javert u/s; Broadway), *Shrek: The Musical* (Shrek; Broadway), *Guys and Dolls* (Sky Masterson; US Tour), *Merrily We Roll Along* (Ensemble; Broadway), *Big Fish* (Don Price, Edward Bloom u/s; Broadway), *Jasper in Deadland* (Mister Lethe; Broadway), *Irma La Douce* (Persil de Noir; Broadway), *On The Twentieth Century* (Ensemble, Bruce Granit u/s,

Max Jacobs u/s; Broadway), *Evita* (Che; Studio Tenn), *Oliver!* (Bill Sykes; MUNY), *Carousel* (Billy Bigelow), *White Christmas* (Bob Wallace), *Assassins* (John Wilkes-Booth), *Footloose* (Chuck Cranston; MUNY), *Soul Doctor* (Shlomo; Muriel's Cabaret Stage at Le Petit Theatre), *Next to Normal* (Dr. Madden; Pioneer Theatre Company), *110 in the Shade* (Starbuck; Ford's Theatre), *South Pacific* (Luther Billis; Ogunquit Playhouse), *Oklahoma!* (Jud Fry; Fox Theatre), *Titanic* (Frederick Barrett; MUNY), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Mr. Salt; Broadway), *The Phantom of the Opera* (The Phantom; Broadway).

Ben didn't get really interested in musical theatre until high school. He explained that "Doing acting for a profession never crossed my mind." He attended Arizona State University, in hopes of becoming a pediatrician. While at college, he explained how he saw other students' passion for medicine. He asked himself, "What am I passionate about?" "Then I realized music and theatre is my passion." Upon this realization, Ben switched from pre-med, to a musical theatre major. Ben graduated Arizona State University with a BFA in Musical Theatre. After graduating, Ben stayed in Arizona for a year as a substitute teacher in order to make money.

After connecting with an agent in New York City, Ben went for an audition for *Les Miserables*. This audition was for the principal role of Javert. Despite his audition going really well, he didn't get the role. A few weeks later, another audition for *Les Miserables* opened up. This series of auditions was for an understudy for the roles of Jean Valjean and Javert, as well as ensemble. The audition process stretched over three days. After the final audition, his agent called him to tell him he got the job. Upon this, he had to quit his current jobs. Ben explained, "I had 3 jobs that I had to quit, and the next day, we went right into it. I had a whole week of rehearsals." Ben started his acting career as part of the ensemble, and the understudy of the two leading roles in *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean and Javert. While he was an understudy, he

described how he was constantly learning. He would watch the principal actors, learn from them, and decide how to execute the character.



(Ben Crawford; Ben Crawford as The Phantom)

I have had the great pleasure of seeing Ben as The Phantom twice and he is absolutely amazing. The top three strong points about his performance were: His singing, how he expressed emotion, and his overall stage presence. Ben's singing was spot on. He's a baritone, but he's able to sing both low notes as well as high notes. His vocal range is perfect for the character. Ben's portrayal of the Phantom is really spot on. He is very great at expressing the emotion that the character feels in each scene. You can feel the anger when it is expressed, as well as the sadness. It is very important to have a good stage presence when performing. His performance touches the audience and leaves them wanting more at the end of the performance. He pulls the audience into the performance, and intrigues them as well. I don't think I have even been as intrigued in a performance as I was when I saw Phantom.

When I attended The Phantom of the Opera on November 27, the way Ben portrayed the Phantom that night really struck me. This was the first time I had teared up, and was on the verge of crying at a Broadway performance. During the final scene, he fell to his knees, and broke down crying. This portrayal really struck me, made me feel for the character, and in turn, affected me emotionally. One of the best parts of live theatre is how every person in the audience will be affected differently. I guarantee you others did not have the same reaction or feeling I had. Being touched by an actor's performance like this can influence others to go into acting, and make others feel this way. As mentioned before, Ramin Karimloo had this happen to him, and wanted to make others feel this way when he performed.

Just like the Covid-19 pandemic affected us and businesses, Broadway was no different. On March 12, 2020, Broadway was forced to shut down all operations. After over 500 days, Broadway shows have finally reopened. The reopening of each show was greatly celebrated by the cast and fans alike. The biggest celebration of them all was when The Phantom of the Opera reopened. There was a red carpet, and the writer of the musical, Andrew Lloyd Webber held a block party after the show! Broadway is a huge part of New York City's culture, and will continue to thrive for many more years to come.

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