

HAMILTON'S HISTORY LESSONS

AS BLOCKBUSTER SHOW CONTINUES TO TOUR, TICKETING PROS CAN LEARN FROM THE SUCCESSES AND MISSTEPS OF THEATERS THAT HAVE ALREADY HOSTED IT

BY
ROBERT GRAY

"HAMILTON" HAS CLEARLY transcended Broadway, and ticketing officials across the country confirm that it has officially exceeded blockbuster status. It is literally the toughest ticket to get in every market in which it's played.

"It's in a class by itself. I've never seen a phenomenon like 'Hamilton,' and I've been in the business for 30 years," said Kay Burnham, vice president for guest services at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Costa Mesa, Calif. "It's touched our society in ways that other shows haven't; it was a very different experience to try and manage."

But since the show has now been on the road for a couple of seasons, venues gearing up for its arrival can draw on lessons learned by Burnham and others in the industry who have experience staging the iconic show.

"Managing expectations is the biggest challenge," Burnham told *VenuesNow*, adding, "That's not just the patrons but internal expectations — from marketing to fundraising to PR to the executive office, there wasn't a single department that didn't have an interest in leveraging Hamilton."

Burnham and her peers at other venues agree that communicating to all in-house and external groups is the key to successfully selling this megahit in an orderly and fair manner. And of course, making sure that your systems are tested and ready.

WHO TELLS YOUR STORY?

The on-sale is key, as that's where venues really begin controlling the narrative for the show in their city. And it can be daunting, especially

for smaller performing arts centers in smaller markets.

The Fox Theatre in Atlanta has handled big shows, so it has more experience than some other venues. It got out early, sending a note with frequently asked questions to people in the venue's database that were thought likely to buy "Hamilton" tickets. It addressed how to buy tickets and what to expect, namely long lines online and in person, according to Jamie Vosmeier, vice president of sales and marketing at the theater.

"We wanted to set expectations," he said.

The length of those lines can be daunting. "With 'Hamilton' we are routinely seeing upwards of 100,000 people in the (virtual) waiting room. Depending on the room, generally it's around 30,000 tickets of inventory with a four-ticket limit" imposed by the shows' promoters, according to Kristin Darrow, senior vice president of product at Tessitura Network. The ticketing company works with more than 150 performing arts centers in the





The national touring company of “Hamilton” (below left) has created a love affair with fans of the show that can leave performing arts centers’ ticketing operations taxed when the on-sale date arrives.

U.S. and 500 other arts and cultural organizations across 10 countries.

Darrow and ticketing executives at venues that have experience staging “Hamilton” strongly suggest working with companies that provide virtual waiting rooms that will keep customers apprised of the wait times and where they are in the queue.

While the waiting is always the hardest part, Darrow says figuring out the sellout time and communicating wait times are crucial. “How long waiting will the public tolerate? We have a lot of experience, and a few hours seems to be palatable for a waiting customer if you’re good about communicating strategy,” she said.

Since “Hamilton” on-sales tend to trend, Tessitura’s Darrow said, “People are on social media at the same time they are buying tickets and it seems to be a public event. ... We recommend having a dedicated social media person with a scripted set of messages they can pull up for any number of circumstances and are posting in real time. That’s made a huge difference in public perception.”

THE ROOM WHERE IT HAPPENS

We may live in a digital era, but patrons are still turning out for on-sales in droves to buy “Hamilton,” so ticketing executives preach preparing your lobby as well as creating a virtual waiting room.

The Segerstrom planned for 1,000 fans to turn out for the on-sale and were met with a wave of 1,400 people showing up. Burnham recalled, “We asked for volunteers from every area of the company to help with crowd control, to answer questions, and let people know where to go. We employed a randomized wristband system, but people were still here at 4 a.m. ... We have a nice café on the public plaza, we brought games for while they waited and we called groups of numbers to stand in line. We had Wi-Fi on the plaza, so they were technically in line having coffee and on their device, trying to get their tickets that way as well.”

She said they ran out of wristbands and then lined people up after that. While she was skeptical that inventory would hold out, Burnham

reports that everyone who got in line got a ticket.

The Aronoff Center in Cincinnati sold tickets to 500 people who visited the box office. Staff handed out numbered wristbands and invited the crowd to wait inside with light refreshments in the lobby.

“We updated availability on some boards in the lobby, so they’d get an idea of where they were in line and they filled out a form with their information

and desired ticket dates, which expedited things,” said the Aronoff’s John Harig, vice president of ticketing. “We were able to serve everyone who was here in the morning when we opened, but we had to cut it off during the day,” which meant turning away some people.

Atlanta’s Fox Theatre built a temporary box office to double to eight the number of its physical box office windows. Vosmeier said, “We had hundreds and hundreds of people show up. ... We passed out forms so you could have three choices, so we were expediting your request for the three dates you chose.”

The Fox Atlanta is preparing for its second staging of the show for the 2019-20 season, which at five weeks will be two weeks longer than the initial run. Vosmeier said it went smoothly the first time around, so they won’t do anything “drastically” different: “We may add additional (box office) windows to keep the lines onsite moving a little faster. We were servicing

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A 40TH TO REMEMBER

**MAUREEN ANDERSEN,
PRESIDENT, INTIX**

WE CAME, WE NETWORKED, we solved the conundrums of the live entertainment ticketing industry. We have long known that the power of INTIX lies in the stories, knowledge and experiences that we share as we gather together for the better part of a week annually. This was truly the experience at #intix2019, Texas, which is now one for the record books with great attendance and engagement. We are incredibly grateful to ALL that participated in this fantastic event. By the numbers: 1,105 attendees from 15 countries; 75 vendor exhibitors; 38 Platinum, Gold, Silver, Bronze and Media Sponsors; 54 (1 repeat) knowledge-based education, best practice, thought leadership and case study workshops; 110 speakers; 9 Inspiration Stage bite-size presentations; 2 dynamic, kick us in the butt, make us stand up and dance, shout yes, snap, women-led keynotes by Cynthia Marshall, CEO of the Dallas Mavericks and DeDe Murcer Moffett, president of Success Strategies in SNAP; 8 fundraising activities, including 3 live auctions, 3 games, 75 surprise boxes, and a “dipjar” netting the INTIX Professional Development Fund over \$32,000; 10 networking events; 1 big Texas-size 40th Anniversary party and 1 bull; and 1 longhorn steer.

We introduced some new programming elements into the program with the Venue Villages presented and sponsored by the Tessitura Network, MLB/Tickets.com and Patron Technology. We added exhibition/exhibitor vendor and workshop scanning with a Microcom partnership and now have access to deeper data detail on the movement and attendance and engagement of our attendees. INTIX continues to answer the needs of the attendees and at #intix2019 we proudly introduced the Women in Live Entertainment Leadership program in partnership with Lynne King Smith and TicketForce. It was incredibly exciting to kick this program off with standing room and overflowing workshop followed with a reception. The conversations were deep, open and honest, and the rooms were electric with excitement and opportunity around this program. We look forward to driving this initiative in the year to come.

INTIX heralded our award winners including the VenuesNow Ticketing Star Award recipients: Christina Allen, Ottawa Senators Hockey Club & Canadian Tire Centre; Alex Renfrew, Tsongas Center and Spectra; Jonathan Lack, Milwaukee Bucks; and Rebecca Throne, Burning Man. INTIX introduced the new Impact Award with its first recipient, Linda Deckard, recognizing her long, stalwart, and unfailing support of INTIX and the live ticketing people and industry. We heralded and recognized our own with the INTIX Awards, including the Spirit Award going to Gail Anderson of the Minnesota State Fair; the FutureTix Young Ticketing Professional to Duncan Moss, Ravinia Festival; the Ticket Office of the Year to San Antonio’s Tobin Center for the Performing Arts; the Ticketing Professional to John Harig of Cincinnati Arts; and INTIX’s most prestigious award, the Patricia G. Spira Lifetime Achievement, to Linda Forlini, Ticket Philadelphia.

The live ticketing industry is in a renaissance period and it is an exciting time of change and growth. As technologies continue to emerge and change how we sell our events, how we secure our venues and facilities, how we mine and use our data, how we welcome our guests and enhance the event experience, one thing is still very clear and perhaps even more important ... the one-to-one experience between event and customer is still the most impactful element that is diverse, exciting and valuable. INTIX is where the dialogues happen that help move and change the relationships, the technologies and the experience. INTIX continues the conversations throughout the year via our content hub and we encourage you to access the best of best at <https://access.intix.org>. Even as we honor our past 40 years and today with the action at #intix2019 we look excitedly to our future and to #intix2020 Jan. 20-23 at New York City’s Midtown Hilton. If you missed INTIX this year you will not want to miss what will be the industry event of the year in NYC. Registrations and hotel bookings will open later in April and we want you there to help drive our future and to be part of the conversation that will continue to be integral to all that we do in service of the industry and our guests. 

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folks in three minutes or less, and our average wait time was about five minutes. Our hope is that everyone leaves happy with tickets in hand.”

DON'T THROW AWAY YOUR SHOT

Some facilities upgraded their tech infrastructure to make sure they could get the job done, from keeping out bot traffic to handling the volume of traffic online and on the phone for those venues that sold tickets that way. “I thank ‘Hamilton’ for giving us a real good reason to update our technology and look to use tech to better serve our patrons,” said the Segerstrom Center’s Burnham.

The venue printed hard tickets that were mailed or available at the box office but did not allow print-at-home tickets. Burnham said the PAC had not gone mobile yet but was looking for a partner.

Other venues offered mobile and hard tickets.

Ticketing pros repeatedly stressed how important it is to be methodical in preparing all systems online and in-theater, especially given the staggering numbers. The Aronoff Center reported its website’s busiest days ever for unique visitors around the on-sale, and the Segerstrom Center created a splash page on its



“Hamilton” fans lined up at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Orange County, Calif.

site to divert any traffic looking for tickets at sister venues away from “Hamilton.”

“The biggest problem for ‘Hamilton’ is the biggest for any on-sale, a lack of testing or preparation,” warned Tessitura’s Darrow, adding, “Usually it’s a small thing, not servers overloaded or a critical bug. The production wasn’t set up

correctly, or it’s a lack of proper testing.”

The best piece of advice, according to the Fox Theatre’s Vosmeier: “Reach out to other markets that have had the show and have been successful so you don’t miss the mark. There are so many opportunities to stumble. You only get one shot to do this right.”

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