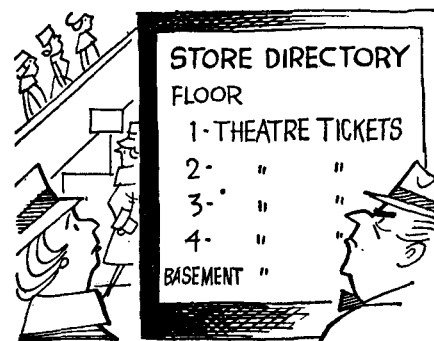


The Plight of The Out-of-Town Theatergoer



A year ago the New York theater industry asked John F. Wharton, a lawyer who is credited with devising the limited partnership agreement by means of which all Broadway shows are financed, to undertake a study of the industry's problems. The result, in the form of a report titled "A Fresh Look at Theatre Tickets," has just been issued, and its recommendations have been unanimously adopted by the Legitimate Theatre Industry Exploratory Commission. The following pages are devoted to appraising Mr. Wharton's findings. They contain an article by Mr. Wharton, a round-up of opinion by theater critics across the country, and a report by SR's drama critic on prospects for solving the theatergoer's ticket problems.

By JOHN F. WHARTON

WE AMERICANS have never been much bothered by inconsistency of thought or action. Nowhere has this been more evident than in our attitude toward the New York theater. I have worked in that theater for more than forty years and have seen it go from insipid unimportance to one of the most dynamic, vital theaters in history. What is more, it did this without asking a penny of government subsidy. It is, today, the only important theater not seeking taxpayers' funds. It has been a great artistic expression of our democratic, competitive, free enterprise system, the system of which Americans are so justly proud.

But we haven't left it free.

Instead of priding ourselves on this great free-world achievement—the equal of, if not superior to, anything the socialized world can offer—the federal government, the State of New York, and the City of New York united in levying unfair taxes on it and enacting regulatory laws of the type to which no other competitive industry is subject (protected monopolies are a different matter).

These laws have, particularly during the past twenty years, been slowly strangling the New York theater to a point where its last gasp is confidently predicted in many quarters.

The effect of these laws has been to drive away large sections of the audience. This, quite obviously, has made play producing a less profitable speculation; hence fewer plays are offered. By the law of averages, fewer plays mean fewer successes, and a vicious spiral is soon in full swing. They have forced on the New York theater a system of ticket selling that only an insane genius could

have thought up. And the greatest sufferers, as we shall see, are those people whom the city wants desperately to attract, the out-of-town visitors.

Happily, the federal laws have been repealed. The state and city laws and regulations remain. Some of these are very little known. The purpose of some cannot be grasped at first. This is because they are based on a curious belief: that the only morally correct way to sell tickets is one that is 400 years old: at a box office that sells tickets to only one play, and at a price that is set before a play opens and is never to be changed, whether or not that price bears any relation to the value of the ticket in the competitive, free-enterprise market. Any offer of a ticket under any other system is deemed immoral; the fact that anyone can say "no" to an offer he doesn't like is completely disregarded.

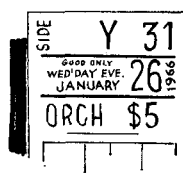
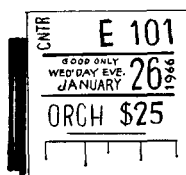
There is a state law that forbids a ticket broker and his employees from selling anything but tickets (with minor exceptions) at his place of business. This has forced the ticket seller to seek locations with cheap rent, and they are therefore inconvenient to the public. It also forces him to squeeze the last nickel out of every sale. It has made it impossible to open branches in motels and in small hotels that don't warrant the employment of one person to sell nothing but tickets. To the best of my knowledge,

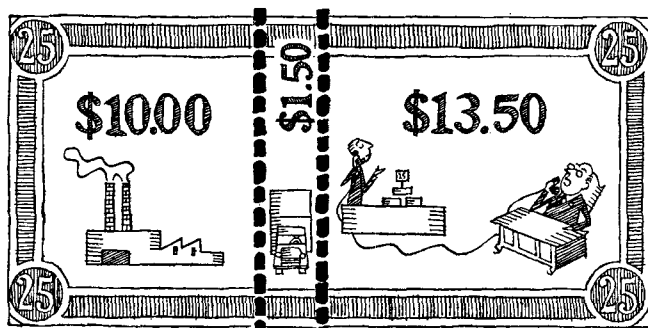
no other theater is so sadly restricted.

There are some regulations of the city license commissioner that were promulgated long ago and are inherited by each new commissioner. Theater owners and producers are forbidden to pay a commission, discount, or bonus to a ticket broker; almost no one realizes the damaging effect of this. If you talk with brokers who have sold tickets for theaters out of New York on a commission basis, they will assure you that this basis is infinitely cheaper to operate and, more important, enables them to build up a satisfied clientele in a way that is not possible under the system clamped on them by existing state and city laws. But, in any event, what other competitive industry is forbidden to sell on commission? The commission method is used all over the country as one of the best ways of rewarding brilliant salesmen. But theater can't use it.

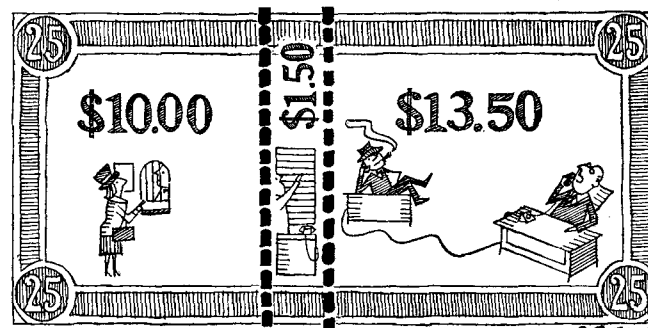
Another regulation forbids tie-in or package sales; these are held to be unquestionably immoral, and officials can hardly believe there are two sides to this question. But what, I ask you, is immoral about tie-in sales? Every other industry uses them. If other industries put a new product on the market, they frequently offer it in a package—a new razor with a bargain sale of blades and shaving cream tied in. Fine! People grab it. But theater tickets? No, there a tie-in is considered immoral. Nonsense! All the prohibition does is to drive the bargain-hunting theatergoer away.

Capping all of this is the law that imposes a \$1.50 limitation on brokers' sales. Just analyze this. There are only two clearly legal ways to sell theater tickets: 1) at the box office, to those standing in line or by mail order; 2) by selling the ticket to a broker who can mark it up by \$1.50, whether it's a \$3, \$5, or \$10 ticket. (Note that he can mark the low-price ticket up 50 per cent but the high-price ticket only 15 per cent, so the least affluent pay the heaviest toll.) Now assume a similar law being applied to another industry. Take the sale of television sets, one of the theater's biggest competitors. Assume that the television-set manufacturer had to establish a price at his factory for each model,





FACTORY \$10.00 WHOLESALE \$1.50 LIST \$25.00



BOXOFFICE \$10.00 BROKER \$1.50 SPECULATOR \$25.00

What's the difference?—the marketing of a razor list-priced at \$25 and a theater ticket scalped for the same amount.

say, \$50, \$150, or \$500. Then, under our assumed law, he would be forbidden to sell those sets anywhere except at the factory, or through a retailer who was forbidden to sell anything but television sets, and who could not make a profit of, say, more than \$25 a set, whether it was a \$50 model or a \$500 model. Everybody would say such a law was preposterous, and it would be. It is equally preposterous when applied to theater tickets.

Finally, let us mention a regulation forbidding a theater owner to sell tickets to an out-of-state ticket broker. This really puts the out-of-town buyer in his place—the lowest place! A man in Chicago or Detroit asks his local broker to get him tickets for Broadway; the local man cannot call the theaters; he must go to a New York broker and pay a \$1.50 markup. Of course he must then add something for himself. Failing that, the Chicagoan can come to New York and trudge through strange streets from box office to box office—or he can, if he has the means, do what most well-to-do out-of-towners do—go to a speculator. Since this is an under-the-counter transaction, he is at the mercy of the speculator; usually, he knows only one and keeps the name secret. If it were over-the-counter, the buyer could quickly ascertain the true market value by phoning other brokers. But somehow, in the minds of headline-hunting politicians, this over-the-counter procedure which is common to every other competitive industry, is deemed immoral in the theater.

It is time that all these laws and regulations were swept out of existence and a modern system put in their place. We are living in the 1960s, not the 1860s. People do not want to trudge from box office to box office any more than they want to trudge from the butcher to the baker to the candlestick-maker. They want the convenience of going to, or telephoning, a supermarket; in other words, a place where tickets to all productions are on sale.

There has been talk of mechanizing ticket sales; setting up machines in con-

venient brokers' offices all over the country; this would be forbidden today by the New York City regulations. Next, there is no reason why people should not be offered a package of tickets to several shows; they can say "no" if they don't like it. And surely there is no reason why we should not have more and more brokers selling on commission and building up a clientele like the one mentioned above. All of this should be possible and could be possible if our free-enterprise theater were really free.

Today, inconsistency rules the roost. The New York theater is a great source of revenue to the City's hotels, motels, restaurants, traffic facilities, and other services. One would think the simplest

intelligence would see the need to promote the theater, to help it in every way possible. But the facts are exactly the reverse. The system which unthinking legislators have clamped upon the New York theater does everything to discourage attendance and to make the theatergoer think he is being cheated, robbed, and defrauded when he tries to buy a ticket. Perhaps if visitors to New York could make their plight known to the city fathers, some relief might be in sight for both the harried ticket seller and the harassed ticket buyer; in short, ticket buying and theatergoing could be made, once more, completely pleasurable for the buyer and therefore more profitable for the seller.

What the Critics Think

SYDNEY JOHNSON, *Montreal Star*: "I applaud Mr. Wharton's very sensible approach to the problem of the laws governing sales of theater tickets. As he suggests, these laws should be brought up to date so that the system for selling theater tickets conforms with modern methods of selling any other merchandise. This is far better than trying to legislate against ticket speculation, which, no matter what laws are enacted, will continue as long as people and business firms are willing to pay any illegal premium to get what they want when they want it."

ELLIOT NORTON, *Boston Record American*: "That the New York theater ticket-selling system is archaic nobody will deny. But I wonder if all the fault is with political regulations. It seems to me that what is most needed is the establishment of a central ticket office, a clearinghouse, in New York. Most New Englanders going to New York want to see a show. They book these shows, as they book their hotel rooms, through one or another of the travel agencies, which can make and confirm the availability of rooms, or plane reservations all over the

country by simple phone calls. To get theater tickets, however, they have recourse to no central source. What the travelers want is, first, information about the nature of a given show. That should be easy enough to furnish. Then they want to be able to get seats, at a given price, on a particular afternoon or evening. If the travel agents had quick access to a central agency, they might conceivably sell a great many tickets, some of them three to six months in advance. Are there any governmental regulations to prevent the creation and operation of such a central ticket office?"

LOUIS COOK, *Detroit Free Press*: "Detroit has a rather large group of commuters who dote on the New York stage but who have a difficult time getting information about how and where to get tickets. It would certainly be helpful if somebody in the provinces were supplied regularly with information about what's playing where, and the availability of tickets. There was such a communication put out during the newspaper strike, and it was very handy, but it seems to have been discontinued. I am certain many more people in my community

would patronize New York theaters if the ticket-buying could be made more painless. It is obvious from Wharton's article why this is difficult under New York law, but there must be a way out."

JOHN K. SHERMAN, *Minneapolis Star*: "I like John Wharton's idea of a super-market, some kind of central agency where the out-of-towner could send for information about plays and tickets for them. At the present time, obtaining New York theater tickets from a distance is like shopping from a mail-order house without the catalogue."

PAINE KNICKERBOCKER, *San Francisco Chronicle*: "Those who travel to New York on business are usually a part of the expense-account audience; those who go for a pleasure trip seem willing to pay the high prices if only because the extravagance is personally reassuring to them. When I am asked, I try to encourage attendance at some of the good, interesting plays that are not being scalped. It is infuriating to observe the behavior of the sheep, and so I feel little sympathy. Let them be fleeced, or attend something of more than superficial distinction."

STANLEY EICHELBAUM, *San Francisco Examiner*: "In San Francisco the ticket brokers refuse to take orders for New York shows, since they never get anything but requests for sell-out attractions—the ones that have no tickets to sell except through scalpers. It therefore seems to me that elaborate systems to facilitate the buying of tickets by out-of-towners might easily fail, though I have nothing against the suggestions outlined by Mr. Wharton."

DALE OLSON, *Daily Variety*, Los Angeles: "I find myself somewhat at odds with what Mr. Wharton has to say. I also am confused. He mentions the prohibition of package prices, yet when I was last in New York every streetcorner on Broadway found someone handing me a package deal for *Baker Street*, involving the price of ticket (at full price) plus a meal at a restaurant, an album, and a souvenir book, all at what would be half the normal cost of the entire package. This is the only way that show could make it. Also, there still are the twofer [two for the price of one] tickets. I am against scalpers. I do not feel Broadway theater tickets are overpriced and I feel that producers take such a chance these days that if one has a hit show, more power to him. Let those people who want to see it write in advance for their tickets. On the other hand, I hate the thought of someone with a wadding pocketbook being able to buy a ticket for \$100 when a solid

theatergoer who has limited finances can't afford to do it. Tickets should be put on sale, at the box office or in regular brokers offices, etc. on a first come, first-served basis."

CLARA HIERONYMUS, the Nashville *Tennessean*: "The *Tennessean* has for ten years sponsored semiannual theater tours to New York, but we have had extraordinary difficulty in reserving the tickets. Since we book five Broadway plays each time—three evening performances and two matinees—working out the schedule is like trying to solve a frustrating jigsaw puzzle. Letters to individual theaters are often neglected, leaving us wondering if we will get the show or whether silence means we've been turned down. Phone calls to the theater treasurer or box office, especially if the theater has a hit going, may be similarly exasperating. The treasurer is reluctant to commit, or confirm positively, a given number of tickets for a specified date. We are likely to be told to request the tickets in writing. As I noted, it will then often be weeks before a reply is received. In the meantime we cannot promote the tour because we don't know if we have the requested plays. It is our thoughtful opinion that a central reservation and ticket office would be greatly beneficial to Broadway as well as to Nashville and other cities around the country. We think also that a commission plan or discount arrangement for volume purchases would be feasible. A theater press representative remarked to me on one occasion, having just learned that we had brought 205 playgoers to New York: 'What Broadway needs is about 500 more Nashvilles!' It would seem therefore that a more practical way of obtaining tickets for Nashville and other communities eager to take groups to New York would undoubtedly work to that indispensable industry's advantage. As things stand now, getting tickets is so difficult and hedged about with so many hazards that many visitors settle for non-theater entertainment and go home feeling cheated of something special."

CYNTER QUILL, the *News-Tribune* and *Times-Herald*, Waco, Texas: "People from my area who go to New York, either for business or pleasure, just have to see a Broadway show. It's a must and, because it's a status symbol also, it must be the newest big hit. Many obtain tickets through a broker or a speculator. They pay through the nose, but they expect to and are not unhappy. For some, the more the markup the grander the symbol. Let us hope some of John Wharton's common sense filters down to those on the scene who can make ticket-buying in New York as simple as going to a movie or the community theater in Waco. Let us also hope, that by its exercise, there are more good plays and musicals to choose from, because the inflated portion of the ticket price is going to the company instead of to the speculator."

WILLIAM MOOTZ, *Louisville Courier-Journal*: "Any critic who sits at a desk far from New York, as I do, knows how bewildered the public generally is about how to get tickets for New York plays. He knows, because he spends too much of his time acting as a clearinghouse. I found that writing to the box office as far in advance as possible was the best way. I continue to advise people to do this, giving them the theater addresses of the shows they want to see, and explaining the bit about the self-addressed envelope and the check. I know this sounds elementary, but it doesn't to the guy who's planning his first trip to New York. A lot of people from this area, however, turn pale at the thought of so many letters and so much advance planning, and simply place themselves in the hands of a travel agent. Such an agent has various packages a client can buy—four nights in Gotham, the Rockettes at Radio City, a ticket to *Hello, Dolly!* and a smashing night out at the Latin Quarter. The idea of a central ticket house where a visitor could shop for shows and buy better packages than those offered by travel agents is surely a good one. I know I would be happy if
(Continued on page 56)



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Mission to the East

A TRIP TO the Far East in the company of the Vice President, covering four countries in seven days, is bound to be regarded more as a demonstration of jet-age magic than as an opportunity to make observations in depth or to develop seasoned conclusions. Even so, there was an opportunity to develop spot impressions, some of which may have validity despite the brevity of the exposure.

The main purpose of the trip was to participate in the inauguration ceremonies of the sixth President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos. However, the flexibility of schedule and speed provided by a Presidential jet plane also made it possible to visit the capitals of Japan, Formosa, and South Korea, where the Vice President could speak directly to Asian leaders about aspects of our foreign policy that were unclear or had caused concern to them, and where he could also learn at first hand about Asian policies that might not always have been clear to us.

In the Philippines, the big story was the obvious one. Despite political, social, and economic upheaval, the people of the Philippines have succeeded once again in achieving that most difficult of all political undertakings, the constitutional and nonviolent transfer of political power from one group of men to another. The historic significance of this achievement may not have been apparent in the festivities themselves, but it was the one point most emphasized in the conversations of the delegates.

President Marcos, personable and vig-

orous, gave an impression of being even younger than his forty-eight years. In his inaugural address, he made no attempt to conceal from his countrymen or from the delegates from all over the world the extreme domestic crisis in which his nation now finds itself. He spoke of the prevalence of smuggling, resulting in massive tax evasion; of graft and political corruption that undermined the integrity of government; of virulent crime and violence; of the widening contrast between poverty and special privilege; of unbelievable housing congestion; and of inequitable prices and wages. An estimated 200,000 people in the stadium and inaugural grounds hailed the President's blistering account of the weaknesses and injustices that had to be overcome; then they sent up a thunderous cheer when he called on each individual to be a national hero in making the sacrifices essential to the correction of what was wrong.

A major problem in addition to those enumerated by President Marcos concerns the exodus of skilled persons. The Filipino people are education-minded. It is doubtful that any other Asian city has as many colleges and training institutions as Manila. But the Philippines don't get the full benefit of their educated citizens. Thousands of doctors, surgeons, dentists, scientists, technicians, and engineers who receive their degrees in Philippine schools take off after graduation for Western nations where fees or salaries are much higher. So the Philippines are starved for the kind of man-

power they produce in such abundance.

To a lesser extent, the same problem was apparent in South Korea. A large number of college graduates, especially women, are unable to find employment that is appropriate to their skills. Hence it is not surprising to meet women lawyers or scientists who are employed as domestic servants.

Outwardly, Seoul seemed sturdy and active. This was the first time I had seen the city since the Korean War in 1951. At that time the city had been badly battered. A human tide of refugees had flooded into Seoul; everything seemed to be spewing about. I had to rub my eyes when I saw Seoul on New Year's Day, 1966. It had been completely rebuilt. Like Hiroshima today, the new Seoul has wide thoroughfares and open areas that contrast with its many new public and business structures. Seoul was busy and productive; the economic factors have been increasingly favorable.

We flew from Seoul by helicopter to the demarcation zone dividing North Korea from South Korea. Here were the grim reminders that the large-scale fighting of 1950-53 may have ended but the peace has yet to be achieved. A narrow strip of a few miles is all that separates fully equipped armies all primed for battle. The United States maintains some 25,000 soldiers near the battle-front. Estimates of the size of the South Korean army on or near the demarcation zone run up to 200,000 men.

One of the striking statistics about the ROK (Republic of Korea) Army is that the cost of feeding a single soldier is twenty-one cents a day. Soldier's pay has recently been doubled; is it now about \$1.10 per month.

Driving back into Seoul after the visit to the front, we saw thousands of citizens lining the streets in order to pay tribute to Vice President Humphrey. Newspapers had not been published for two days because of the extended holiday, so there had been no announcement about the route that would be taken by the Vice President or the time. Yet people in large numbers materialized out of nowhere to applaud and cheer. Several times the Vice President halted the motorcade and, to the consternation of the security officials, went among the people, sometimes losing himself in the crowd. At one point an enthusiastic Korean grabbed the Vice President and embraced him.

Whether intended for the Vice President personally or symbolically, the warm response of the Koreans was unmistakable and encouraging.

The stopover in Taipei lasted only a few hours, most of which were spent by the Vice President in consultation with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and his staff. Following the meeting, there was speculation by some newsmen that the