

# NEW YORK ON THE OTHER SIDE OF COVID-19

BY MARK ROOS

COVID-19 upended the composer's world. Period. Full stop. Projects have been canceled/delayed/put on 'hold' or outright canceled. Work schedules seem to be forever altered, with questions still lingering about how best to deal with the pandemic's fallout. As composers worldwide have excelled at adapting, we thought SCL members would be interested in perspectives from Broadway, fellow composers, and placement libraries on how the industry has changed and what the future may hold.

## BROADWAY'S KEN DAVENPORT: COVID's Impact

Many people believe Broadway is New York: what defines this city. Broadway's sudden stop has been devastating to the industry. Tony® Award-winning Broadway producer Ken Davenport gives unique insights into how Broadway is adapting and what New York's theater seasons will be like going forward. Ken said, "This is the biggest crisis the theater has ever faced because we have never been down this long. We will be back in a timeframe that seems epically long right now, but we will be back. At the end of the day, we'll come out of this in a year, year and a half—that's nothing compared to World War II. Nothing compared to the years people spent glued to their television sets during Vietnam. So, in perspective, I think we're going to be back in a shorter time period than other events of a similar nature."

### New Way Forward

Ken then spoke about the need to rebuild the theater business, which will take some time. "People are no longer in the habit of going to the theater. Those people who go to the theater, once, twice a month, take two trips a year to experience Broadway, our avid theater-going base, their habit has been broken. So, we're going to have to get people



KEN DAVENPORT

to rebuild that habit, and that's not going to happen overnight. Sixty-five percent of our audience base are tourists; tourism is down, with tourism not projected to be back to pre-pandemic levels before 2022, so it's going to take some time."

Because of the close proximity of theatergoers, Ken explains some of the protocols that are being proposed, such as masks, though he doesn't see social distancing on Broadway, stating, "I don't think it works economically; neither does it work for the experience. Ticket sales are driven by word-of-mouth, which is

not at its high point when there's a theater that is only 25 percent full. So, I think we're going to wait until we're comfortable with us going back and having as close an experience as before as soon as the lights go out. That probably means super rapid-fire testing and a vaccine. So, I believe it's going to be sometime in 2021 before we're back to where we were before, in terms of gathering in theaters."

### In the Pit

How is the theater industry changing with how they're going to present the shows? "For the musicians in the pit, there are very specific issues that they face. For example, they blow air into instruments. They're in tight quarters. So I imagine you'll see barriers for musicians in the pit, since they can't wear masks, except percussionists, who I would imagine would wear masks. What I do know is this, for both employees and audience members: [there's] no one thing that we can do, before a vaccine to make everyone comfortable. It's going to have to be a stack of things. We're masking everyone we can mask, we are cleaning the theaters after each and every show, we have contact tracing, we have testing, we have hand sanitizer—it's going to take a lot of things to make it comfortable for people to go to work, and people to see the shows."

### It's Not the Ticket Price

Ken doesn't believe slashing Broadway ticket prices is the best way to rebuild attendance.

“Marketing removes friction. There is friction between a purchaser and seller. And it’s the marketer’s job to reduce the friction. It’s not going to be the price. It’s going to be where it is safe. When you’re dealing with an issue as serious as COVID, we have to solve the safety issue first. That’s why we’re taking more time.”

Ken says, “The good news is that theater is happening in other areas of the world. We’ve had spikes in cases around the country, so we’re still fighting this battle. There are pockets of the world that have come back faster than we have. There is a production of *Phantom of the Opera* that is running in Seoul, Korea. China is starting to come back online.”

Ken’s theater conference was virtual this year, on November 14 and 15. Keynote speakers spoke on the topic “Making Theater in a New World.” For more information, visit: <https://www.thetheatermakersstudio.com/tms-summit-information1594936244150>

## COMPOSER SIDDHARTHA KHOSLA: A New Way of Working

Getting a composer’s perspective on how COVID has impacted work and projects going forward, I had the opportunity to interview Siddhartha Khosla, New Jersey native and composer for the hit show *This Is Us*. Siddhartha notes, “Since the pandemic hit, there’s been either a delay on productions or a full-on cancellation of productions. So, unless something had already been shot, edited, and sent to me, everything was put on pause. That impact has been felt, so in terms of actual work, it’s gone away for a period. I know it’s going to come back. When the date comes that it’s safe to go again, whatever was paused is going to now happen at the same time as everything that was originally scheduled for the Fall. We’re not going to have the luxury of knowing that everything is spaced out; so workflow is going to be a challenge, but we’ll figure it out.”



SIDDHARTHA KHOSLA

### Compressed Schedules

In terms of workflow, Siddhartha gave a great example about how he navigated scoring the final episode of *This Is Us* from season 4, which was mid-pandemic. “As lockdown happened, the show had to clear their post-production office, and I had to scramble, knowing that we were headed to that point. So I rushed as fast as I could to score that final episode because I knew the editors were rushing too. I was writing before seeing certain scenes, preempting what was going to happen. I knew what it was going to look like; I knew the story, had the script, so there were a lot of conversations between Juliette Grove, our editor of the final episode, about what to expect.” Siddhartha composed the score so the editors could cut to the composition, explaining, “For the composer, it’s a dream situation because they were cutting to the music. As far as logistics, things were very compressed; I had to work quickly and imagine the picture with the knowledge that they were going to be listening on their iPhones.”

### Adapting the Score

Another way that Siddhartha helped the creative process was to create multiple versions of the theme, stating, “We were ‘pre-creating’ as well, giving them five atmospheric themes that the editors could fly around and hang for four or five minutes in a scene.

That’s the beauty of thematic scoring, that I find myself scoring to picture less. I believe that the score should not hit everything you see, that there should be a balance between what you see and feeling the larger emotional weight of the music, while being thematic at the same time. I could also ‘pre-write,’ so that’s how we adapted in this environment.”

Siddhartha explained, “I can confidently say that the relationship I have with the editors of *This Is Us* is ultimately what got us through the finale and allowed us to weather the pandemic: because of that trust. There are some composers who want to wait until they can see locked picture. I want to start super early; it’s got its challenges because you end up doing a lot of work that sometimes doesn’t get used. But it also shapes the way the show is made in post-production, in that editors then begin to rely on a piece of music before they’re cutting. I’ll get calls from editors now, not just on *This Is Us*. I try to do it on any show I’m scoring; they’ll call and say, ‘I’ve got this scene coming up; I haven’t cut it all together yet, but here’s what’s happening, and we’re going to be going back to this image four or five times. Could you write me a piece of music that could evoke the emotion?’ So, I’ll ask them to send me a screenshot and then go from there. Then the editors will cut to the composition, so the relationship between editors enabled us to get there.”

### Know the Technology

As to how the pandemic changes what composers are going to be doing and the expectations going forward for those we’ll be working with, Siddhartha advises, “For the newer composer, learn the technology. Not because of the pandemic, but because learning the technology is key. Do the homework; learn how to get good sounds—it’s not just knowing how to run Pro Tools. Know the techniques, what mics to use. Become well versed in the technology. It’s now 90 percent of my workflow. We don’t know when the pandemic will be over, and we don’t know what the ‘new normal’ will look like. It’s certainly draconian compared to how we were living before. Maybe we’ll find ourselves in a sort of modulated version of where we are now, and that will translate and trickle into the way we write and record. There has to be a ‘do-it-yourself’ mentality as we move forward. We have to invest the time and energy to learn.”

## Looking Out for Musicians

“As composers, we need to look out for the musicians who are making our scores come to life. We are nothing as composers without the musicians who are playing on them, nothing. Whether we are doing it ourselves or we are working with other musicians to do it, we should find creative ways to keep us all employed, and we cannot forget about the musicians because they are the ones, I fear, who are going to have the toughest time getting through this. They’re not getting the songwriting and score writing royalties that we’re getting. So I’m encouraging the productions I’m working on going forward to contractually build in more room and budget for live musicians, more than ever. So instead of finding a string sample on a MIDI program, I’m going to work doubly hard to get the violinist paid to do that. Even if it’s the simplest thing in the world and I can get a great sound from a sample, I’m going to get it from the live player. I would encourage composers everywhere to think about the other musicians in this process, and how we can help them get through this. Be creative in your deals, for example; I am asking for an additional three-hour session per episode for the musicians’ time, and I’ll use that session for the musicians to make sure they are playing on it [the score], because once we’re through it [the pandemic], we’ll all be better off for having taken care of the people who got us here.”

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## ROB REALE: 4 Elements Music

Many composer studios have been nominally impacted by COVID-19, but music placement houses have required more adaptive measures such as switching to remote solutions. Rob Reale, founder of 4 Elements Music in New York, said, “Don’t think of my business as ‘post COVID.’ We are very much in the middle of it still. Even though we’ve learned to adapt technologically, we’ve had to come up with remote solutions. We’ve had to streamline our process. We still don’t know when we will return to our employees being back in the studio together. People are still nervous



ROB REALE

about commuting, being hesitant to use public transport.”

## Composer Upside

On the composer side, Rob also reports a huge influx in signed composer submissions, as well as a huge uptick in potential composers. Reale further commented, “We’re now inundated with dozens of new composers every week wanting to write for us, because they want to make good use of this time.” He noted that one of the challenges some composers are having is “staying in a creative headspace” when in isolation.

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## JOEL FEINBERG: DeWolfe Music

Joel Feinberg of New York-based DeWolfe Music USA stated, “Business is stronger now than it ever was [before COVID] because of early reaction and opportunities that have been presented as a result of the business environment changes. Cosmopolitan centers are now too disruptive for my business and prompted a change to remote offices for my workforce, that ‘virtual’ is the way; physical meetings are still necessary ingredients in

the cake, but now it’s just a reversing of the order. Human contact is no longer the first ingredient in the cake. Now a virtual strategy is the first ingredient, and meeting together is more of the glue, no longer being the primary ingredient. Having a good virtual and conceptual strategy for our company is now the primary ingredient, whereas it used to be the other way around. By reducing the physicality of needing to be in an office, we spend less money. Now all our projects and concepts are mapped out in Microsoft Teams and channels. We’re rolodexing our way to improvement. However, we can’t completely lose physicality. We’re people, we’re artists, and physicality is still necessary, but now it’s less wasteful.”



JOEL FEINBERG

## Stay the Course

The pandemic has upended our world, forcing us to examine how we work, create, and interact with one another, producers, editors, and placement houses, stretching our creativity, and hopefully inspiring us all to greater heights. Though we’re certainly not on ‘the other side’ yet, one thing is for sure: Composers and the creative community we proudly serve, as has often been the case, will adapt into a new, bright future. Again.