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ENTERTAINMENT

Shows to resume on Broadway after 19-day stagehands' strike ends

By Michael Kuchwara, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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NEW YORK - It was curtains up Thursday, as Broadway raced to reopen for business after stagehands and theatre producers reached a tentative agreement and ended a crippling strike that kept more than two dozen shows dark for 19 days.

The settlement came Wednesday night, the third day of marathon sessions between Local One of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and the League of American Theatres and Producers to end the lengthy work stoppage that cost producers and the city millions of dollars.

Most plays and musicals that were shut during the walkout, which began Nov. 10, were expected to be up and running by Thursday evening.

"The contract is a good compromise that serves our industry," said Charlotte St. Martin, the league's executive director. "What is most important is that Broadway's lights will once again shine brightly, with a diversity of productions that will delight all theatregoers during this holiday time."

Union President James J. Claffey Jr. was equally effusive in signing off on the agreement, saying, "The people of Broadway are looking forward to returning to work, giving the theatregoing public the joy of Broadway, the greatest entertainment in the world."

Details of the five-year contract, which must be approved by the union membership, were not disclosed.

But negotiations, which began last summer, were difficult, right up to the last day, as both sides struggled with what apparently was the final hang-up - wages. It concerned how much to pay stagehands in return for a reduction in what the producers say were onerous work rules that required them to hire more stagehands than are needed.

Until then, the talks had focused on how many stagehands are required to open a Broadway show and keep it running. That means moving scenery, lights, sound systems and props into the theatre; installing the set and making sure it works; and keeping everything functioning well for the life of the production.

The strike couldn't have happened at a worse time for Broadway. Such popular shows as "Wicked," "Jersey Boys," "Mamma Mia!" and "The Lion King" were closed during the lucrative Thanksgiving holiday week. It's normally one of the best times of the year for Broadway when the city is filled with tourists and Christmas shoppers.

Financial losses were staggering. But it wasn't just producers and stagehands who were hurt. Actors, musicians and even press agents lost paycheques, too. And theatre-related businesses also suffered.

City comptroller William Thompson estimated the economic impact of the strike at US\$2 million a day, based on survey data that include theatregoers' total spending on tickets, dining and shopping. The league put the damage even higher.

Eight shows remained open during the strike (their theatres had separate contracts with Local One), and they were joined by a ninth when "Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas!" got a court order to let it reopen.

The end of the walkout means a scramble for new opening nights for several shows that were in previews when the strike hit. They include Aaron Sorkin's "The Farnsworth Invention," "August: Osage County" from Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company and an adaptation of a long-lost Mark Twain comedy, "Is He Dead?"

Disney's "The Little Mermaid" already announced it would push back its scheduled Dec. 6 opening - with a new date still to be set.

"We are so excited," Tituss Burgess, who portrays Sebastian the crab in the lavish musical, told New York 1 TV. The actor said he hadn't anticipated the strike would last as long as it did.

"We hope everyone's satisfied . . . the atmosphere around our stage door was: We tried to remain positive," Burgess added. "We're just happy to be going back to work."

Alecia Parker, executive producer of "Chicago," said tickets to the musical's Thursday reopening would be sold at the box office at a discounted \$26.50 and that she wasn't worried theatregoers might not come back to Broadway.

"I think people have been very disappointed to have Broadway dark," Parker told the television station. "I think we'll see an outpouring of support from the community."

Parker said rehearsals were planned Thursday to get the cast back up to speed, but she anticipated few problems. "You can imagine the adrenaline for coming back after 19 days," she said.

Broadway's last strike occurred in 2003 when musicians staged a four-day walkout. The musicians also struck in 1975, shutting musicals but not plays for 25 days.

- Jennifer Peltz and Dino Hazell contributed to this report.

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On the Net: Union: <http://www.iatselocalone.org>

League of American Theatres: <http://www.broadway.org>

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