

To: Dr. Moore

From: Former Student

Class: EN285

Re: Situational Crisis Project: Natasha, Pierre, and the Casting Crisis of 2017

This study examines the social media crisis that closed a Broadway Production.

1. Background

Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812 is an eclectic Broadway musical based on a section of plot from Leo Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*. It opened on Broadway in late 2016 after a successful off-Broadway run in 2012 at Ars Nova in New York City (Stewart). The ambitious immersive staging and gigantic cast received a great deal of attention from theatre goers, and after a glowing review in the New York Times, *The Great Comet's* light was bright. According to Playbill's weekly Broadway gross tracker, *Great Comet* was making over \$1,000,000 per week, showing that the show was doing quite well for itself despite its unusual staging and less marketable source material.

In the high stakes world of Broadway, shows need millions of dollars in start-up funds to secure a theatre, hire a staff, and design a production. These expenses all come in to play before the show is even rehearsed. During the rehearsal period, a team of producers has to raise money just to rent a rehearsal space and pay everyone associated with the production. These expenses all come into play before any revenue can be brought in via ticket sales. During a show's run, gross income generally covers the weekly operating costs of the show, and only a small percentage is funneled back toward that initial investment.

Great Comet required a gargantuan initial investment, estimated to be up to \$14,000,000 (Paulson). This large figure is due to the transformation that the set designer created for the entire theatre, not just the stage space, as well as the large cast and crew that that production employed.

Great Comet producers were able to secure the initial investment from backers by securing Josh Groban to play the lead in the show. Groban had the star power to ensure audience interest in the show (Blair).

The production was nominated for 12 Tony awards, but did not ultimately win any of the awards that are associated with ticket-selling, like Best Musical, Best Actor, Best Actress and others.

2. The Crisis: A Social Media Mess

By July 2017, *Great Comet* was in danger of closing due to poor sales and lack of interest once Josh Groban, departed the production at the end of his contract. Producers had planned for this by announcing Groban's replacement, Okiriete "Oak" Onaodowan, well before the end of Groban's run. Onaodowan had been known for his turn in smash-hit *Hamilton*, but he ultimately did not have nearly the star power that producers expected. Ticket sales dwindled, with a total discrepancy of nearly \$600,000 between Groban's final week and Onaodowan's first week (Playbill). Producers, panicking that the show would have to close quite soon, were looking for a replacement on the sly (Paulson).

Broadway legend Mandy Patinkin was soon announced to replace Onaodowan, and Broadway fans were soon clamoring for tickets once more. Patinkin hadn't been seen on Broadway in a few decades, and many were excited to see his turn as Pierre, despite the large age discrepancy between the age of the character and the age of the actor.

This did not come without controversy. Patinkin's run would begin three weeks before Onaodowan had been previously scheduled to leave, due to Patinkin's filming schedule. This news was evidently not briefed to Onaodowan prior, as he reacted with social media silence, not positivity for Patinkin (Paulson). Onaodowan's social media influencer friends, including rapper Rafael Casal, started drumming up a social media firestorm, claiming that the producer's decision was racist and unfair to Onaodowan, a black actor (Bonazzo).

Soon, fans of Casal and of *Hamilton* were demanding that Onaodowan be given his part of the run back. The producer's initial press release stated that they were happy that Onaodowan would "make room for" Patinkin. This phrase was turned against the producers, with the hashtag "#makeroomforOAK" trending.

Other black Broadway actors came out in defense of Onaodowan, including Tony-winning actress Cynthia Erivo. The publication *Broadway Black* wrote an article questioning the producers' decision, which was shared across social media in Broadway circles (Wakefield).



3. The Response: A Mis-Hit

Producers, who had apparently not foreseen this reaction, were stuck in a corner. Patinkin, who had been receiving hateful tweets and comments, soon announced that he would not be playing the role of Pierre as courtesy to Onaodowan (Hetrick). Onaodowan soon announced that he would not be continuing in the role of Pierre at the end of his newly-shortened run (Hetrick). The producers were left without a Pierre, and the role was untouchable for many of the high-profile actors who had been interested in playing the part. The show closed in September of 2017 without a permanent replacement (Cox).

4. Producer's Three Statements & Analysis

The producers made three total statements about this situation to the press and to Twitter and Facebook.

- A statement announcing that Patinkin would join the cast, cutting Onaodowan's run short.
- A statement explaining the producers' decision.
- A statement apologizing to Patinkin for the controversy.

All three statements were attributed to Howard Kagan, who served as the production's lead producer.

Statement 1:

“THIS CONTINUES OUR SHOW’S REMARKABLE HISTORY OF HAVING GREAT ACTORS AND SINGERS SEE THE SHOW AS AUDIENCE MEMBERS, ONLY TO TELL US THAT THEY ARE INSPIRED TO JOIN THE CAST! WHENEVER POSSIBLE, WE WILL ACCOMMODATE THEM AS WE DID HERE WITH MANDY AND HIS HOMELAND TV SCHEDULE.

“OAK, WHO WAS SCHEDULED TO APPEAR AS PIERRE FOR THIS PERIOD, GRACIOUSLY AGREED TO MAKE ROOM FOR MANDY, AND WE SINCERELY HOPE THAT OAK WILL RETURN TO US IN THE FALL OR WINTER. HE IS A TERRIFIC PIERRE.”

-HOWARD KAGAN

Those who read this statement immediately noticed the phrasing “make room” regarding Oak leaving the production early. Many immediately turned that phrase against the producers, telling them that they should have “made room” for Onaodowan and not cut his run short. Some were conscious of the fact that Onaodowan, a young black actor, would be losing out on three weeks of pay due to this casting decision. The producers never made it clear whether this decision would leave Onaodowan financially secure, or if the producers would be compensating Onaodowan in any way for the time now left open in his schedule.

The phrasing of the statement made it clear that Onaodowan was left out of the decision and had not particularly consented to his run being cut in half. When dealing with issues of celebrities and their fans, it’s important to note that fans can be quite passionate about assuring the safety and well-being of the people they like. It did not seem as though Kagan had realized that Onaodowan had a wide network of fans who would be upset and angry at this decision.

In the time between the first statement and the second, fans using Twitter, Reddit, and BroadwayWorld had drummed up a lot of buzz about the possible injustice being carried out against Onaodowan. Within 48 hours, Patinkin dropped out, feeling that the producers had blindsided him (Bonazzo). This left the producers without a Pierre, and they had to rely on Onaodowan to continue out the rest of his previously-scheduled run.

Onaodowan, evidently feeling under-valued by Kagan, took to Instagram to announce his departure from the production on August 13th (see image, below). This was at the end of his newly-shortened run. Members of the cast took to Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook to share how disappointed they were about the developments that had occurred.



It took far too long for the producers to come up with a response. In the intervening time, Dave Malloy, the creator and composer of the show, posted a series of tweets illuminating the backstage decision-making process (Hetrick). No satisfying answers were given, but fans appreciated that their voices had been heard, according to replies to Malloy’s tweets. Malloy also stated that he and the producers had not considered the racial optics of their choice to replace a young black actor with an older white actor.

Statement 2:

An image of a statement was posted to Twitter with the text “Our Apologies” accompanying it. Below is that image:



As part of our sincere efforts to keep Comet running for the benefit of its cast, creative team, crew, investors and everyone else involved, we arranged for Mandy Patinkin to play Pierre. However, we had the wrong impression of how Oak felt about the casting announcement and how it would be received by members of the theater community, which we appreciate is deeply invested in the success of actors of color – as are we – and to whom we are grateful for bringing this to our attention.

We regret our mistake deeply, and wish to express our apologies to everyone who felt hurt and betrayed by these actions.

- Howard Kagan

Fans immediately noticed that the language used served to blame Onaodowan for starting the controversy. Instead of apologizing to Onaodowan, Kagan used blame-shifting language to subtly place the blame on Onaodowan’s reaction, not Kagan’s own decision.

Kagan also thanks the community for illuminating a greater issue in casting. The language is vague and apologetic, but the content itself was lacking, at least according to fans who were hoping for an apology to Oak. This statement also did not make the role of Pierre any more desirable, and rumours say that actors who had been interested in playing Pierre had dropped out of the running due to the controversy.

Statement 3:

This statement lifts a lot of the language from the second statement but adds an apology to Mandy Patinkin. It was tweeted as an image.



We apologize to Mandy Patinkin for any misunderstanding and understand his decision to withdraw from the show. We had the wrong impression of how Oak felt about the casting announcement.

Again, the language used shifts the blame to Onaodowan. Fans were not satisfied by this half-apology, as they felt that Onaodowan should also have received a full apology from the producer. Patinkin never commented on this apology.

It is also interesting that Kagan never put his name to this apology. It is as though the PR team wanted to distance *Great Comet* from Kagan, who had become increasingly unpopular over the past 48 hours as the events of the controversy unfolded. The alternate conclusion might be that Kagan did not want to apologize to Patinkin at all, and the PR team decided to put this message out without Kagan's name.

The New York Times criticized Kagan for his reluctance to share financial details about *Comet* with investors, and marked the difference between the way cast and creatives talked openly about the show's financial woes and the way Kagan stayed silent on the issue (Paulson). Even today, Kagan does not work on Broadway and has instead tried to break into film producing (Paulson).

5. An Alternate Reality: A Creative Portfolio of Alternate Tweets

1. Twitter: This tweet addresses the ticketing issue that fans of Patinkin ran into. Fans rushed in drives to purchase tickets to see Patinkin, but once Patinkin dropped out, many were unsure of what to do with their tickets and if they were refundable at all. Broadway ticketing associations generally agree that if an "above-the-line" performer is absent, the ticket holder can receive a full refund, but the *Great Comet* account never publicly made this clear to ticket holders.



2. Facebook: This post is phrased as an apology to both Onaodowan and Patinkin. Howard Kagan never publically apologized to Onaodowan, which is something that the fans of the show and of Onaodwan quickly noticed. Further controversy could have been sidestepped, had Kagan made a sincere apology to Onaodowan.



6. Conclusion: The Takeaways and Costs

Great Comet closed on September 3, 2017. It probably could have run at least through the holiday season, had the show been able to secure famous actors to play Pierre. The show continues to find success in foreign markets, having made premieres in both Brazil and Japan (BWW). Still, the production has not received a national tour, and performance rights have not been released to amateur or professional theatre companies. It looks like *Great Comet*'s star has burned out, at least in North America.

The show is still mentioned in Broadway circles whenever star casting is brought up, and Onaodowan has not worked on Broadway since. Whether this is his choice or the choice of casting directors is unclear, but it is unquestionable that there are still those in the Broadway community who resent him for allowing the controversy to continue.

Broadway is an expensive enterprise, and it's important to note that PR firms who deal with Broadway must be aware of both the high stakes involved, and the high enthusiasm of Broadway fans.

There are three main takeaways that one can glean from this situation:

1. Be aware of **all** of the implications of phrasing, especially in short press releases.
2. Keep stakeholders in the loop—and remember that fans can be stakeholders, too.
3. Make sure that all spokespeople or **potential** spokespeople are aware of the messaging and don't contradict the overall message being given.

Natsha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812 was a vibrant, fun, brilliant production. It did not need to close in controversy. Good PR crisis management could have saved this show and the livelihoods of so many actors, musicians, technicians, and managers.

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