

What to know about the 2021 Tony Awards

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The 74th annual Tony Awards, or the 2020 Tony Awards, will be broadcast Sunday, Sept. 26, 2021. Hold on, 2020 awards in 2021? Correct. But wait, it's September, aren't the Tonys usually held when the sun is out and not when the leaves are turning brown? Yes, and yes, and before your confusion reaches a fever pitch, we have answers to all your Tony-related questions.

Q: *This is the 74th installment of the Antoinette Perry Awards, a.k.a. the Tonys. Is it only shows on Broadway that are eligible?*

A: Yes, but there is an annual award given for regional theater, as well as a set of noncompetitive awards each year, including a lifetime achievement award and an excellence in theater award.

Q: *Where and when can I watch?*

A: The two-hour Tony Awards ceremony starts at 7 p.m. Eastern time on Paramount Plus. The second part of the awards ceremony is a live two-hour concert titled "The Tony Awards Present Broadway's Back!" and will start at 9 p.m. on CBS right after the main awards ceremony.

Q: *Wait. The Tony Awards are usually given out in June, right? Why are they happening now?*

A: Someone's done their research! Because of the coronavirus pandemic, the original broadcast of the 2020 Tony Awards was postponed from June 7, 2020, to Sept. 26, 2021.

Q: *Covid shut down Broadway on March 12, 2020, and shows are just starting up again now. What period on Broadway do these awards cover?*

A: The eligibility cutoff date for the 2019-2020 season was originally April 23, 2020. The pandemic forced the season to end early, and a new cutoff date was announced — Feb. 19, 2020. That meant that only the 18 shows that had opened before that date were eligible for Tony nominations.

Q: *Okay, so now I get that there are two parts to the Tony festivities Sunday night. What's that about?*

A: Here's how the night will shake out: The awards ceremony portion begins at 7 p.m. Eastern time on the streaming service Paramount Plus, hosted by Broadway star Audra McDonald. The majority of the awards will be announced then, with the exception of the three major categories: best play, best revival of a play and best musical.

At 9 p.m., switch over to good old-fashioned broadcast TV to watch "The Tony Awards Present Broadway's Back!" on CBS, where Broadway stars and Tony winners will perform live onstage. The concert, hosted by "Hamilton" star Leslie Odom Jr., is a celebration of live theater after more than a year of shuttered shows and digital productions. At the end of the concert, the winners of those three major awards will be announced.

Q: *There are only three shows in the most prominent category: best new musical. Why is that?*

A: Because the cutoff date was shifted, that meant new arrivals such as "Girl From the North Country" are missing from this year's best new musical nominees.

Q: *Okay, this is weirding me out. There seems to be only one person nominated for best actor in a musical: Aaron Tveit, for the stage version of "Moulin Rouge!" Really? Whose idea was THAT?*

A: With all due respect to Aaron Tveit, he got kind of lucky. The new cutoff date messed things up, and for the first time in the history of the Tonys, he is the sole nominee in an acting category. However, that doesn't mean Tveit automatically wins; he still has to get at least 60 percent of the affirmative votes. Technically, Tony voters have the option to vote for no one in the category, but have you seen how handsome that guy is?

Q: *What other awards during the streaming portion between 7 and 9 p.m. should I be paying close attention to?*

A: Keep an eye out for "Slave Play" and its 12 nominations; Adrienne Warren's nomination in best performance by an actress in a leading role in a musical for her turn as Tina Turner in "Tina: The Tina Turner Musical"; and seven-time nominee Danny Burstein, up for best featured actor for his role in "Moulin Rouge!: The Musical." Watch for a few famous faces from the screen who have earned nominations: Jake Gyllenhaal in "Sea Wall/A Life" and Laura Linney in "My Name Is Lucy Barton" are both nominated for lead acting roles in a play.

Q: *Jeremy O. Harris's audacious satire "Slave Play" has received more nominations than any nonmusical in Tony history. Is there any special significance if it takes home the Tony for best play and a basketful of others?*

A: In a 2019 review, Washington Post critic Peter Marks called "Slave Play" "the kind of communal experience that permits you to laugh, even as it helps you out of your own myopic corner." Harris has created a rare piece of art that asks audiences to see how racism is deeply rooted into the fabric of this country. "Slave Play's" 12 nominations are remarkable because they're also a reminder that theater's predominantly White audiences and power players are going to be continually challenged by art that's not always comfortable or "perfect." Harris himself cheekily changed his Twitter screen name to "MOST TONY NOMINATED ONEHIT WONDER," a wink and a nod to the cynics who have dismissed his work.

Q: *So I can't see any of the plays up for best play on Broadway? No plans to bring any of them back?*

A: None of those productions have plans to return and have concluded their initial runs.

Q: *So what's the point of awards for live theater you can no longer see?*

A: An awards show may just seem like a ploy for industry accolades and ego boosts, but the large-scale recognition for live theater means that the people reimagining, creating and ensuring the show goes on can keep doing so. Nominations, and a potential win, can change a career and keep more art accessible for audiences.

Q: *Then again, four hours on a Sunday night with Broadway stars and show tunes? How bad could it be?*

A: In a year during which we've experienced every kind of theatrical hybrid on screen — from Stephen Sondheim's 90th birthday celebration to entire plays done on Zoom — there's something grounding and kind of miraculous about being able to sit back, kick your shoes off and sing a few of your favorite show tunes in celebration of Broadway's return.

