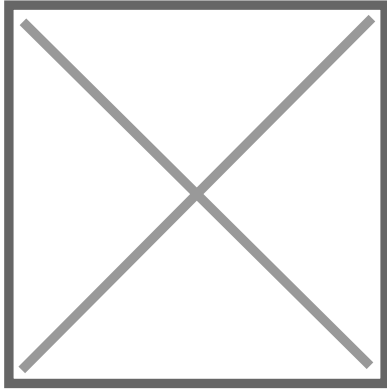




Life of Pi: Survival, Spirituality, and the Power of Puppetry

Description

Salt Lake City, UT's Broadway Across America's *Life of Pi*, currently playing at the **George S. and Dolores DorÃ© Eccles Theater** in **Salt Lake City**, is a mesmerizing blend of visual splendor and profound existential questioning. Directed by **Max Webster** and adapted by **Lolita Chakrabarti** from **Yann Martel's** acclaimed novel, the production brings a dreamlike intensity to the stage, immersing audiences in a world where survival, faith, and storytelling intertwine.

Life of Pi follows Pi Patel, a young boy from **Pondicherry, India**, whose family owns a zoo. As they journey across the ocean in search of a better life, disaster strikes, leaving Pi stranded on a lifeboat with a zebra, an orangutan, a hyena, and a fierce Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. Facing the vastness of the sea and the unpredictability of nature, Pi must rely on his resilience, imagination, and belief in the extraordinary to survive.

The Broadway production of *Life of Pi* won three **Tony Awards** in 2023 for Best Lighting Design of a Play, Best Scenic Design of a Play, and Best Sound Design of a Play, showcasing its technical brilliance. Additionally, the seven puppeteers who played the tiger â Richard Parkerâ in the West End production earned the Olivier Award in April 2022, for Best Supporting Actor, a testament to the show's innovative approach to storytelling, the first time an award of that magnitude has ever been given to a puppet or character shared by multiple people.

Taha Mandviwala and Richard Parker
Photo Credit: Matthew Murphy, murphymade

Taha Mandviwala delivers an outstanding performance as Pi Patel, navigating the character's journey with remarkable physicality and emotional depth.

Taha Mandviwala delivers an outstanding performance as Pi Patel, navigating the character's journey with remarkable physicality and emotional depth. From the playful innocence of Pi's early life

in India to the raw desperation of his struggle at sea, Mandviwala fully embodies the role. His portrayal is gripping, particularly in moments of despair as he calls out to multiple gods in his search for salvation.

Life of Pi

Photo Credit: Matthew Murphy, murphymade

Visual Mastery and Puppetry as Storytelling

One of the production's most extraordinary achievements is its breathtaking puppetry—most notably, the Bengal tiger Richard Parker. Brought to life by a team of eight remarkably skilled puppeteers—**Ben Durocher, Shiloh Goodin, Anna Leigh Gortner, Aaron Haskell, Toussaint JeanLouis, Betsy Rosen, Anna VomÁ•ka,** and **Andrew Wilson**—the tiger is a masterclass in collaborative performance. Guiding this artistry is a visionary team led by **Finn Caldwell** and **Nick Barnes**, with additional support from **Scarlet Wilderink** (global associate puppetry & movement director) and **Jon Hoche** (U.S. associate puppetry & movement director/resident director). From the tiger's predatory grace to its rhythmic breathing and sudden bursts of aggression, every movement feels uncannily real—making Richard Parker a visceral, ever-present force that raises both the emotional stakes and the tension of Pi's journey.

The Tiger's movements—its predatory grace, breaths, and sudden bursts of aggression—make Richard Parker feel alive, heightening the tension and emotional stakes of Pi's journey.

A performer manipulating a large, colorful puppet of a tiger during a theatrical production.
Photo Credit: Matthew Murphy, murphymade

Behind the Scenes: The Creative and Production Team

Guiding the tour with precision and vision, **Ashley Brooke Monroe** serves as the Tour Director, ensuring that the production maintains its artistic integrity and emotional resonance across different venues.

Managing the intricate logistics of the tour, **Katie Cortez**, the Company Manager, and **Frank Deming II**, the Assistant Company Manager, handle the behind-the-scenes operations that keep the production running smoothly, from scheduling to cast and crew coordination.

The seamless execution of each performance falls under the expertise of the stage management team. **Kelsey Tippins**, the Production Stage Manager, leads the charge in ensuring that every technical element aligns perfectly, while **Matthew Brooks**, the Stage Manager, and **Fouad Hassan**, the Assistant Stage Manager, work meticulously to coordinate cues, maintain consistency, and support the cast throughout the show.

Together, this exceptional team creates the foundation for the magic of *Life of Pi*, ensuring that each performance is as captivating and flawless as the last. I am so incredibly impressed by this team of creators, and although I would normally not highlight the behind the scenes crew, I knew I had to when

I read in the program about **Assistant Manager Fouad Hassan**, who is legally-blind and â??dedicates his work to beautiful Arabs who rarely see [themselves] and [their] real stories represented.â?•

Fouad Hassan, finds joy as a stage manager

Themes of Faith, Survival, and Storytelling

Life of Pi is more than just a survival storyâ??it is a meditation on the nature of belief. The play raises profound questions: What is real? How do we make sense of suffering? Is God present in moments of despair? The production brilliantly balances these existential themes with moments of humor and warmth, particularly in Piâ??s early explorations of different religions.

A mesmerizing blend of visual splendor and profound existential questioning.
â??Rhetorical Reviewâ??

Richard Parker
Photo Credit: Matthew Murphy, murphymade

Mandviwalaâ??s interactions with supporting charactersâ??such as **Sinclair Mitchell** (Piâ??s pragmatic father), **Jessica Angleskhan** (his caring mother), and **Sharayu Mahale** (his free-spirited sister Rani)â??ground the playâ??s opening scenes in a sense of familial love, making the tragedy that follows all the more devastating. Later, **Mi Kang** as Lulu Chen and **Alan Ariano**â??s versatile performances as Mr. Okamoto and the shipâ??s Captain provide a striking contrast between the analytical world of adults and the imaginative survival narrative Pi constructs.

The Power of Storytelling: Fact, Fiction, and Survival

One of the most compelling aspects of *Life of Pi* is its meditation on the power of storytelling. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that Piâ??s survival is not just a matter of physical endurance but also of narrative construction. The story he tellsâ??of being stranded at sea with animals, of forging a delicate and dangerous relationship with Richard Parkerâ??is a way of making sense of trauma. The audience is forced to ask: is Piâ??s fantastical version of events true, or is it a means of coping with a far more brutal reality?

The show doesnâ??t just tell a storyâ??it asks what stories are for.

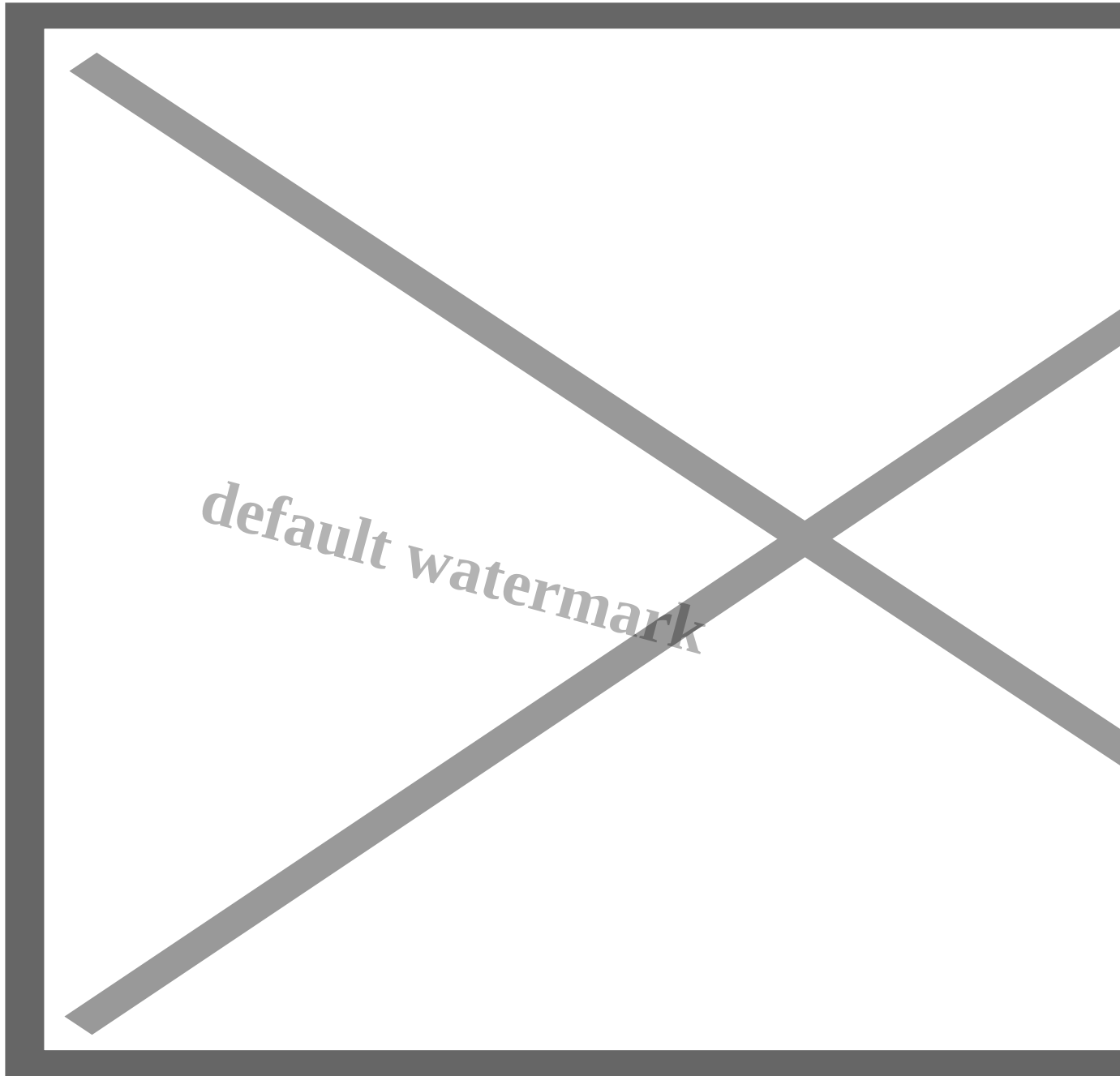


Photo Credit: Matthew Murphy, murphymade

In the final scenes, when Pi recounts his experience to the authorities, he presents them with two possible stories: one filled with animals and wonder, and another, far darker, involving human cruelty and survival at any cost. He then asks, **“Which story do you prefer?”** This moment encapsulates the play’s central theme—sometimes, the truth is less important than the meaning we derive from it.

This exploration of storytelling extends beyond Pi’s personal experience, offering a broader commentary on how humans use narrative to make sense of life’s chaos. Whether through religion, mythology, or personal memory, the way we frame our experiences determines how we understand the world and ourselves.

The Perception of Faith in Life of Pi

Faith is a central motif in *Life of Pi*, not only as a theological concept but as a means of endurance. Throughout the play, Pi embraces Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, seeking truth in each tradition. His belief system is not static but evolves as he faces adversity, revealing faith as a dynamic force rather than a rigid structure.

The play suggests that faith, much like storytelling, is an act of choice. When faced with unimaginable suffering, Pi does not abandon belief; rather, he leans into it, using it as a means of survival. His prayers and invocations—whether to Vishnu, Jesus, or Allah—are not just cries for divine intervention but affirmations of hope. This portrayal highlights a universal truth: during hardship, faith—regardless of its form—can offer solace and meaning.

Furthermore, the ending challenges the audience's perception of faith. By presenting two versions of his survival story, Pi compels the viewers to confront their own biases—do they believe the miraculous tale with the tiger, or the grim reality of human savagery? In this way, the play mirrors the nature of religious faith itself: it is less about objective truth and more about the perspective one chooses to embrace.

Key Insights from Media Day

The *Life of Pi* Media Day offered a fascinating glimpse into the intricate craftsmanship and creative vision behind the production. Cast and crew shared their approach to adapting this philosophically rich novel for the stage, revealing the physical and emotional depth required for such a monumental task.

Mandviwala, who portrays Pi, discussed the intense physical and emotional demands of the role, emphasizing the importance of movement training to seamlessly interact with the puppetry, stating,

“Performing this story night after night is a labor of love. I tap into personal experiences—losing loved ones, facing fear—but I also use technique: breath control, posture, and emotional placement. Consistency is key because I have to deliver the same intensity every night.

At the same time, I maintain boundaries with the work. I’ve realized that this show isn’t just emotionally draining—it’s also fulfilling. Every night feels fresh. The story changes how I think about spirituality. Even though I’m expending energy, I leave the stage feeling full.”

~Taha Mandviwala

At Media Day, we were given an up-close look at Richard Parker, the incredible Tiger Puppet, by three of the puppeteers: Aaron Haskell, Anna Vom̃ka, and Anna Leigh Gortner (seen in the video above). Vice President of Broadway Across America, Richard Hamburger, remarked, *How many of you noticed the breath? How cool is that, right? That’s part of why you suspend disbelief—you see the breath, and you see that this is a living creature. It’s so beautiful.* Then, Hamburger turned to the

Puppeteers, asking, *“There’s so much coordination involved. Do you all have to train together to function as a unit? Aaron, can you walk us through that process?”*

Aaron Haskell: At the beginning of rehearsals, sometimes even in auditions, we breathe together in a circle. We practice heightening and lowering our breath as a way to communicate non-verbally. It’s a technical skill for the stage but also a way to bring the character to life. Instead of saying, *“I’m going to move now,”* we use breath to signal it.

Anna VomÃ¶ka: It’s very physically demanding. We all come from different movement backgrounds—dance, tumbling, parkour—and we rely on those practices to stay in shape. We also have a physical therapist who travels with us on tour to help us maintain our bodies.

Anna Leigh Gortner: As the hind puppeteer, I bring Richard Parker’s tail to life. The tail has a lot of personality—it rises when he’s hunting, tucks when he’s scared, and wags in anticipation. When he’s stalking prey, it gets very still and curls up.

Actors who play Richard Parker, the Tiger, in *Life of Pi*

My personal conversation also explored the show’s puppetry style and influences. **Jon Houch** shared that *The Lion King* was one of the first major inspirations for their approach. He noted, *“But the style of puppetry here is different.”* Like *Sesame Street* puppets, or the *Lion King*, they all have different techniques. **Betsy Rosen**, a key member of the puppetry team, explained that their technique has roots in traditional [Japanese Bunraku puppetry](#), where multiple puppeteers control different parts of a single puppet: The omozukai controls the puppet’s right hand, the hidarizukai (or sashizukai) manipulates the left hand using a control rod, and the ashizukai operates the feet and legs. Rosen clarified, *“The style we use requires precise movement and coordination to create a more specific, nuanced performance,”* she said. In *The Life of Pi*, three puppeteers similarly manipulate one puppet; however, *“the head puppeteer is the only one whose face is visible. This creates a more specific movement and precision in motion.”* This is why perhaps the movements are so life-like.

Puppetry here is not a gimmick; it is the soul of the stagecraft.

Taha Mandviwala and Puppet
Photo Credit: Matthew Murphy, murphymade

One of the most fascinating things I learned on Media Day was that the production initially had three teams of three puppeteers, each rehearsing for five weeks in New York to synchronize their movements and create a seamless portrayal of Richard Parker, the tiger. Each team developed a unique dynamic affecting the tiger’s energy and movement. As the tour progressed, teams were mixed, eventually integrating all eight puppeteers. Now, any combination of three performers can bring Richard Parker to life, making each performance slightly different, much like how different actors bring unique interpretations to the same role. With all the combinations, there are now many variations of Richard Parker, possibly up to eighteen, or even twenty.

Final Verdict: A Must-See Theatrical Experience

While the production is visually and emotionally stunning, the adaptation does condense some of the novel's philosophical depth in favor of spectacle. The ambiguity surrounding Pi's story—whether it is a literal tale or a metaphor for a more harrowing human experience—remains, but the play's brisk pacing sometimes leaves less room for introspection. Those deeply attached to the novel's slow-burning existential musings may find the theatrical version more direct in its messaging.

That said, I found the experience absolutely thrilling. Broadway Across America's *Life of Pi* at the Eccles Theater is an extraordinary theatrical achievement that combines technical brilliance with heartfelt storytelling. Its breathtaking visuals, masterful puppetry, and emotionally charged performances create an unforgettable experience. While the adaptation leans slightly more into action and visual storytelling than philosophical introspection, it still delivers a powerful meditation on faith, survival, and the stories we tell ourselves.

Preview of the Broadway Show

Venue: The George S. and Dolores Dora Eccles Theater, 131 Main St, Salt Lake City, Utah

Performance Dates & Times:

- April 2, 3, 2025 at 7:00 PM
- April 4, 2025 at 7:30 PM
- April 5, 2025 at 1:00 PM, 7:30 PM
- April 6, 2025 at 1:00 PM, 6:30 PM

Tickets: \$71–\$178

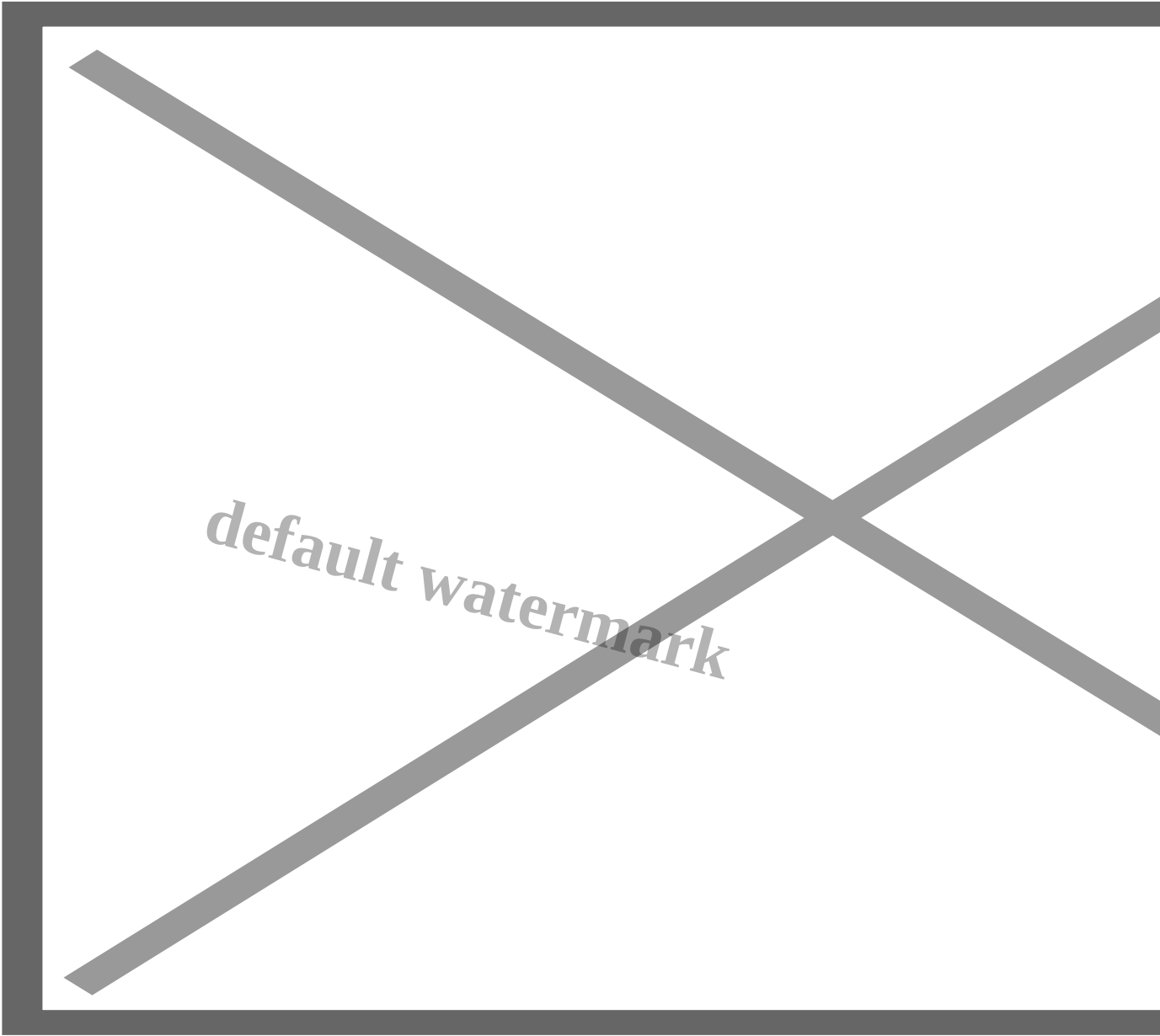
Available at the **Eccles Theater box office** (131 South Main Street, SLC, UT 84111), online at saltlakecountyarts.org/events (official link only), or by phone at **801.355.2787 (ARTS)**.

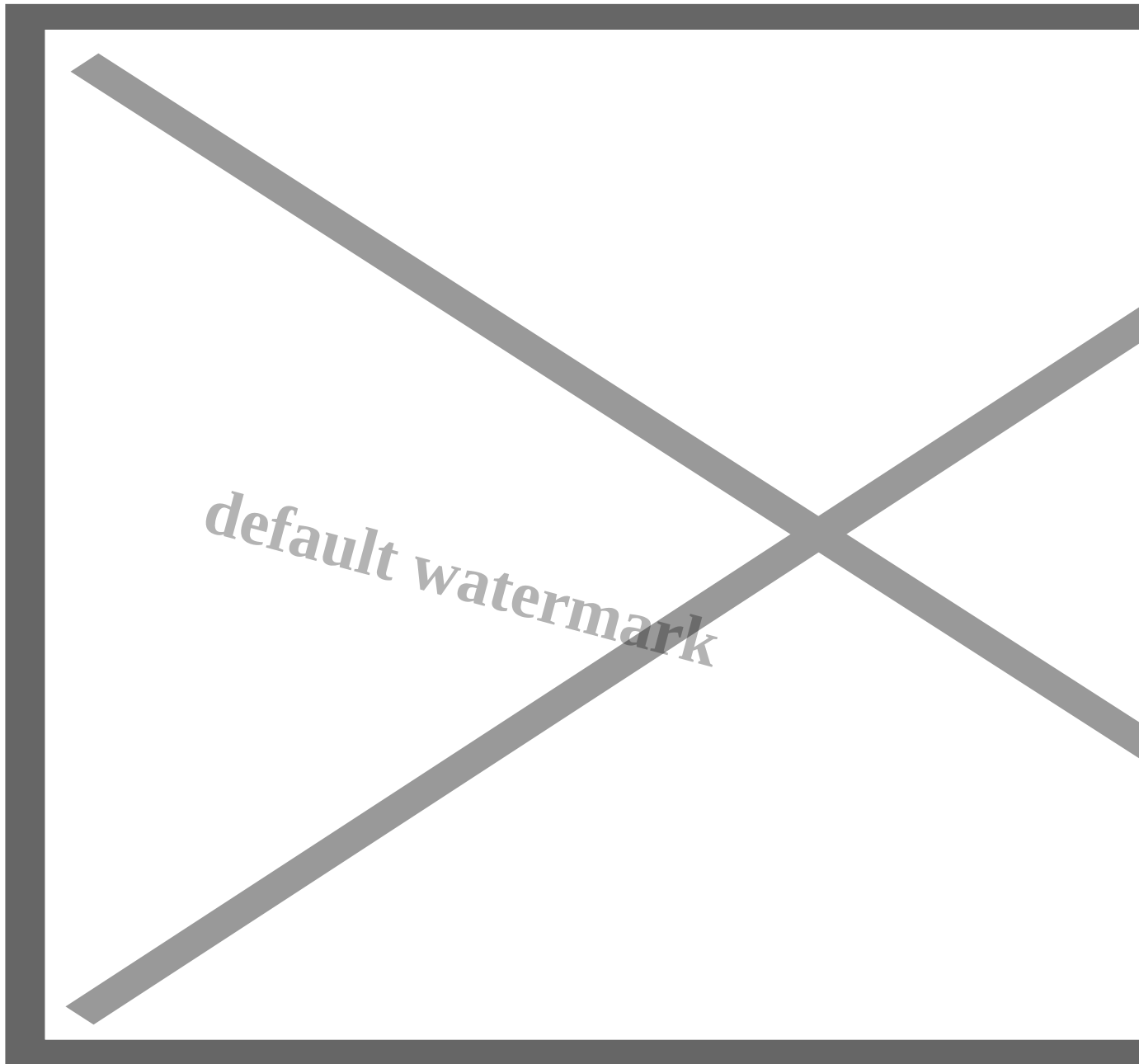
*\$39 day of Student Rush tickets are available for every show

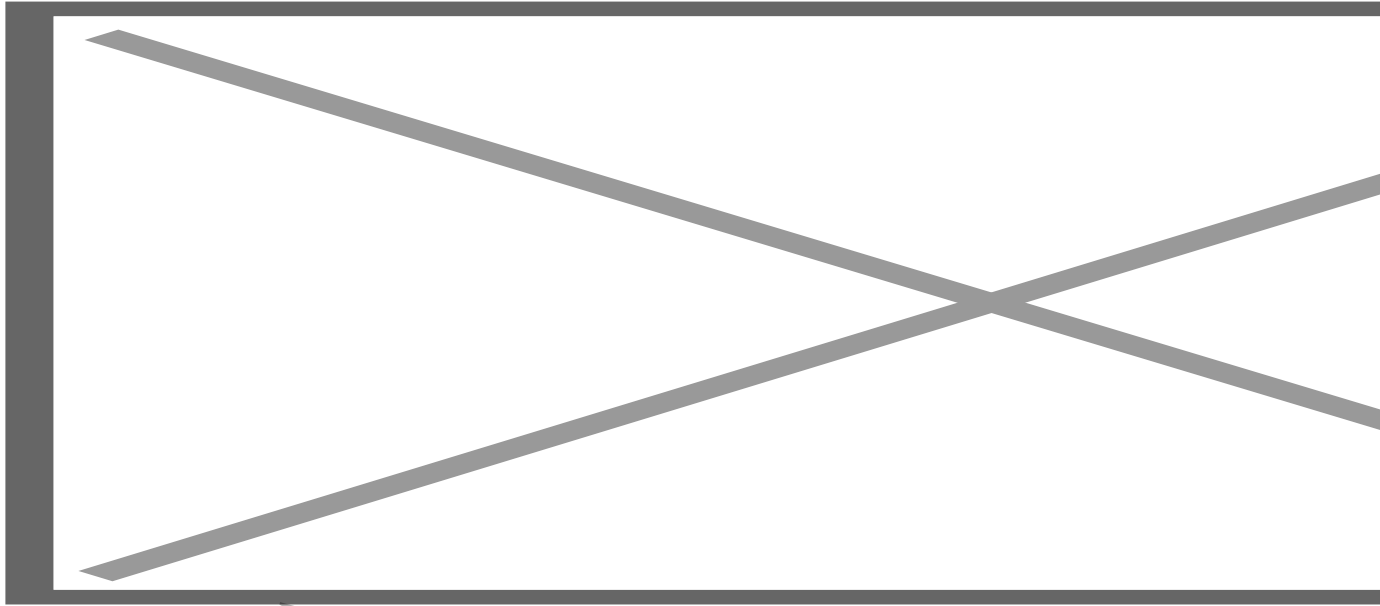
Accessibility:

- **ASL-Interpreted Performance:** Thursday, April 3, 2025, at 7:00 PM. Patrons interested in this performance should select seats located at Orchestra Left on the Main Floor, rows D-H. [Salt Lake County Arts & Culture](#)
- **Audio Description Performance:** Friday, April 4, 2025, at 7:30 PM. Devices are available at the Patron Services window in the main lobby. [Salt Lake County Arts](#)

The Eccles Theater is committed to providing an inclusive experience for all patrons. The venue offers wheelchair-accessible seating, assistive listening devices, and ASL-interpreted performances upon request. For specific accessibility needs, contact the box office in advance at **801.355.2787 (ARTS)**.







Category

1. Reviews

Tags

1. Aaron Haskell
2. Alan Ariano
3. Andrew T. Mackay
4. Andrew Wilson
5. Anna Leigh Gortner
6. Anna VomÃĀka
7. Ashley Brooke Monroe
8. Ben Durocher
9. Betsy Rosen
10. Broadway
11. Broadway Across America
12. Broadway Producers
13. Broadway Tours
14. Carolyn Downing
15. David Brian Brown
16. Eccles Theater
17. Ensemble Cast
18. Faith in Theater
19. Finn Caldwell
20. Fouad Hassan
21. Frank Deming II
22. Jessica Angleskhan
23. Jon Hoche
24. Katie Cortez
25. Kelsey Tippins

26. Keola Kinghorn
27. Lia Vollack Productions
28. Life of Pi
29. Lighting Design
30. Literature Adaptations
31. Lolita Chakrabarti
32. Matthew Brooks
33. Max Webster
34. Mi Kang
35. Nick Barnes
36. Projection Design in Theater
37. Puppetry in Theater
38. Puppetry Performance
39. Religious Themes in Theater
40. Rhetorical Review
41. rhetoricalreview
42. Richard Parker Puppet
43. Salt Lake City
44. Salt Lake City Arts
45. Salt Lake City theater
46. Scarlet Wilderink
47. Set and Costume Design
48. Sharayu Mahale
49. Shiloh Goodin
50. Sinclair Mitchell
51. Sound Design in Theater
52. Stage Design
53. Stagecraft
54. Storytelling on Stage
55. Survival Stories
56. Taha Mandviwala
57. The Araca Group
58. The Power of Storytelling
59. Theater Criticism
60. Theater Puppetry Experts
61. Theater Reviews
62. Tim Deiling
63. Tim Hatley
64. Tim Lutkin
65. Touring Theater
66. Toussaint JeanLouis
67. Yann Martel

Date

2026/10/05

Date Created

2025/04/02

Author

keola06

default watermark