

# Bigger, Better, Back: Return to Live Theater with a Trip to 'The Office'

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BY

L to R: Nathan David Smith as Dwight and Emma Brock as Michael Scott. | Photo courtesy of The Theater Center

**WINNIE McCROY** | As we emerge from the lengthy COVID-19 lockdown, the barometer for things “getting back to normal” is, for many people, their return to

the office. While it's still a bit early for some folks to physically return to their workplace, the time is perfect for a return to the simple thrills of the Off-Broadway comedy *The Office! A Musical Parody*, which resumed performances on April 9, at the Jerry Orbach Theater.

Safety first, though: Protecting those in the seats and behind the scenes is paramount here, with all audience members and staff masked. Guests are escorted to their socially distanced pod seating, and only players are unmasked. Staff do deep disinfection cleaning daily, and the theater (accommodating only 33 percent of its audience capacity) is equipped with Sensedge Air Quality monitors on each floor, plus Atmosair Matterhorn 1002 "Air Scrubbers" to catch and kill any contaminants in the air—the same system NASA and U.S. hospitals use to neutralize viruses, bacteria and VOCs in real time.

And now, back to our show—For the first time since March 2020, the popular parody returns with a full cast. With book and lyrics by Bob and Tobly McSmith—creators of such parodies as *Bayside! The Saved by the Bell Musical*; *FRIENDS! The Musical Parody*; *Full House! The Musical*; and *Showgirls! The Musical*—this "*The Musical*" takes a look at the inhabitants of your favorite Scranton paper company, Dunder Mifflin.

The two-hour run time allows for the cast to delve into nearly the complete nine-season story arc of the long-running show, from the smoldering romance between Pam and Jim, to Dwight's dreams of becoming branch manager, to the Sabre takeover, the Dundee Awards and every little inside joke the nine seasons contain. Since the TV show was a mockumentary to begin with, there's a lot of funny to work with, and the cast delivers.

Emma Brock grounds the production as manager Michael Scott, perfectly inhabiting his clueless, Id-driven persona. Laura Renee Mehl is his trusty receptionist sidekick Pam, who delights the audience when she illustrates her artistic talent by holding up her childlike finger-painting. Pam is engaged to warehouse worker Roy but spends most of her day engaging in childish pranks with salesman Jim, played in this performance by Andy Martinez.

Jim's nemesis is Dwight, an excellent Nathan David Smith, the no-nonsense Luddite beet farmer-cum-paper salesman who nurses a flame for skinny, blonde, cat-lady Angela, played to perfection by Gabrielle Filloux. Although Dwight kills her beloved cat Sprinkles and stores its kitty corpse in the freezer, Angela is equally smitten with him, as evidenced by their frequent sexual rendezvous in the warehouse.

Emily Qualmann has her hands full playing ancillary characters like quiet Phyllis with her party planning aspirations; slutty alcoholic Meredith, who Michael hits with his car, and goofy Kevin, who works his spilled-chili schtick to great effect. Devina Sebnis does a good job playing most of the characters of color, including Kelly Kapoor, referred to in the play snarkily as “Mindy Kaling,” as well as gay Latino Oscar, who Michael refers to at one point as “Sissy Spacek.”

Mehl also plays Pam’s replacement Erin, played in the TV series by Ellie Kemper, breakout star of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. She emerges dressed like Kemper’s character in that show, with the *Unbreakable* theme song playing. It’s comedy gold. Sadly, there is no Stanley in this production.

Without giving away all of the charms that make this worth watching, here are some of the high points:

The show is chock-full of original parody songs that will tickle your funny bone. Among the best are *That’s What She Said*. It’s Michael Scott’s famed catchphrase, and the song comes right after his girlfriend/boss Jan prohibits him from saying it. As I’m sure you can guess, the other characters tempt him with rich setups.

Other great musical moments come when the cast sings, *Hamilton*-style, that they’re “not going to lose our shop,” cheering when corporate decides to close down the Stanford branch instead. There’s a banjo serenade from “Nard-Dog” to Angela, and a song about Dwight becoming acting manager. There’s a party planning tune that results in a party celebrating every holiday all together, and another when everyone’s drunk at Chili’s, receiving their meaningless Dundee Awards.

The second act includes highlights such as the Sabre takeover by CEO Jo Bennet and her two large hounds, who is referred to in the musical as simply “Kathy Bates,” the actor who plays her on the TV show. There is a hilarious song by the female characters, performed atop rolling toilet bowls, complete with TP streamers. I can honestly say I’ve never seen anything quite like it. There’s even an elaborate number about Michael’s spy alter ego “Agent Michael Scarn,” all concocted to get him to sign some office paperwork so that Pam and Jim can run off and elope in Niagara Falls. And I’m not even mentioning the elaborate Fun Run episode, Angela’s baby contract with Dwight, or infamous late-season manager Robert Hollywood. If you’re a mega-fan of *The Office*, this will be the funniest two hours you’ve ever spent not watching TV.

So, if you’re tired of sitting at home binging reruns of *The Office*, get up off the

couch and head to Times Square theater district to catch the first of the city's productions to get back up and running after nearly 15 months of lockdown. It'll be bigger and better than you have any right to expect—That's what she said!

*Now playing at The Jerry Orbach Theater at The Theater Center, 210 West 50th Street. Thursdays and Fridays at 7:30pm; Saturdays at 2pm and 8pm; Sundays at 3pm. For tickets (\$52-\$80), call the box office at 212-921-7862 or visit [www.theofficemusicalparody.com](http://www.theofficemusicalparody.com).*

Book and lyrics by Bob and Tobly McSmith

Music by Assaf Gleaner

Direction and choreography by Donald Garverick

Scenic design by Josh Iacovelli

Lighting design by Alex Stevens

Sound design by Matthew Fischer

Costume design by Dustin Cross

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