

Wollman studies, teaches the magical world of Broadway musicals

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“My father is from Brooklyn, so we have family here. We came in frequently from my native Pittsburgh, and my parents always took us to theater. So that was a long interest, and then I was a performer as a child and in high school, came to New York, sort of lost the performance thread, and in college became interested in academia, which has always struck me as a kind of performance. Teaching is a kind of performance as well.”

That is how Dr. Elizabeth Wollman explains the evolution of her interest in the performing arts. She obtained her bachelor’s degree in English from Columbia University and her doctorate in ethnomusicology from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Today she is an associate professor in the Department of Fine and Performing Arts of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College.

But why did Broadway become what it is as a world center for the performing arts? “New York was established pretty much on trade. For the first 100 years or more, it was really not an intense cultural center. But it became one because it’s a port city and because so many people came here and established themselves here, and after a while there were so many different kinds of expression that by 1825 we really consolidated ourselves as a center for cultural expression,” says Wollman.

She also says that the density of theatrical venues in the city is hard to grasp. “There is so much theater here that it’s kind of like restaurants. If you start a restaurant here, the food has to be good, it has to be competitive, or it’s going to close, because there is another restaurant next door and another one down the street. There’s 87 of them across town in the same style. So New York audiences have such a wealth of choices that the competition is especially fierce.”

After humble beginnings and after being influenced by immigrant theatrical experiences like the



Dr. Wollman at work.

Photo by Yulia Rock

Yiddish, Italian and German theaters, Broadway developed into what it is today. “We now have a real mix. Like this country, our musical theater is mixed, although it remains primarily of interest to white, upper-middle class, educated audiences. Recently, however, there has been much more of a push to appeal to more diverse audiences, and I think *Hamilton* has pushed that a long way,” explains Wollman.

One kind of musical that had a hard time developing and that Wollman has studied is rock musicals. “Composers who were raised in a musical theater aesthetic—Richard Rodgers and Stephen Sondheim and people who came up in the earlier generations—had no idea what to do with rock music. And they perceived it, I think, as noise. They thought it was silly, it was repetitive, they

dismissed it,” she says.

And then came *Hair* in 1968. “I think what happened is that, from the time of people like Jonathan Larson in the early nineties, just about every composer working on Broadway today has at least heard of rock music. So now we have such a varied and rich popular music tradition that has been mined, as have previous rich, varied popular music traditions. Jazz, ragtime, blues, Latin music have all been brought to Broadway at various points. I think composers are much more comfortable now. If you look at composers like Jeanine Tesori, Lin-Manuel Miranda, the people who have written this coming season—I have seen a number of different musicals just from this season alone, and it’s impossible to separate rock and popular music from everything else that’s on Broadway now,”

Wollman explains.

One typical complaint regarding Broadway performances is how expensive tickets are. Having studied the economics of musicals, Wollman has a straightforward explanation. “I think production values have risen. First of all, New York City is a phenomenally expensive city. Those theaters are tremendous real estate. They were built over 100 years ago at a time when it was, ‘Okay we’ll throw up a big theater, and we’ll see what happens.’ They are monumentally expensive to maintain, it is monumentally expensive to put on a show, and even the smaller productions are very hard to fund. You can find discounts, but I think one of the reasons audiences remain fairly stagnant on Broadway is that it’s very hard to get tickets that are cheap. As a result, Broadway attracts the same audiences of people who can shell out \$100 per ticket.”

On the controversy about musicals adapted to film, this is what Wollman has to say. “A number of different film musicals have been made that are considered to be better than others. *West Side Story* is held up as a really excellent adaptation, although I’ve got colleagues who will be very quick to say, ‘No, I hate the movie version of *West Side Story*.’ People get very passionate about this.”

But there are other venues for musicals in New York City that some people are not very aware of. “Broadway is really the center of commercial theater, but there are so many other theaters that are not nearly as intensely commercial, and they’re thus freer to do more interesting, risky productions that are much more touch-and-go. You can go Off-Broadway and especially Off-Off-Broadway, which is even less commercially intense, and you can see shows that are much riskier, but that are then more challenging in ways that Broadway productions can’t afford to be,” says Wollman.

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