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 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.

Wollman explains. 

十足的音乐剧场和艺术科学院的校友们曾经在纽约市的迪斯尼中心和巴丘尔学院里工作过，她现在是巴丘尔学院的艺术与人文学院的教授。

但为什么纽约会成为世界的戏剧中心呢？“纽约建立的最初是因为贸易。一百多年的时间里，它并不是文化中心。但它成为了一个中心，因为它是一个港口城市，并且有许多人来到这里并在这里安家立业，所以这里的竞争尤其激烈。”

她说，纽约的剧院密度很难让人理解。“这里有那么多剧院，就像餐馆一样。如果你在纽约开一家餐馆，你的食物必须是好的，必须是竞争性的，否则它会关门，因为旁边就有另一家餐馆紧挨着。这里有87家剧院在同一个风格。所以纽约的观众有如此多的选择，以至于竞争非常激烈。”

在经历了早期的犹太、意大利和德国剧院之后，百老汇发展成了今天的样子。她说：“我们现在有了真实的多样化。就像这个国家一样，我们的音乐剧是混合的，尽管主要还是白人、中产阶级、受过教育的观众。但是近年来，已经出现了更多的多元化，我认为《汉密尔顿》推动了这一点。”

一种难以为继的音乐剧类型是摇滚音乐。她说：“在90年代早期，像乔纳森·拉森这样的作曲家已经了解了摇滚音乐。所以现在，我们有如此多的不同的音乐传统被挖掘，就像以前一样丰富，各种不同的音乐传统。爵士、拉格泰姆、蓝调、拉丁音乐都被带到了百老汇的各个地方。我认为作曲家现在更舒服了。如果你看看像珍妮·泰索里、林-曼努埃尔·米兰达这样的作曲家，他们在这一季写的新作品——我看到很多人从这一季开始的不同音乐类型，就从这一季的音乐中分离出来，它是不可能把摇滚和流行音乐从其他的一切中分离开来。”

一个常见的抱怨是关于百老汇演出的票价高昂。已经研究了音乐剧经济学的沃曼有一个直接的解释。“我认为制作费用已经上升了。首先，纽约市是一个非常昂贵的城市。这些剧院是在100多年前建造的，那个时候是，‘好吧，我们建一个大剧院，让我们看看会发生什么。’它们是极其昂贵的。因此，百老汇吸引了同样付得起100美元票价的观众。”

关于音乐剧被改编成电影的争议，沃曼说：“有很多不同的电影音乐剧被制作出来，有些被认为是更好的。《西区故事》被推崇为非常好的改编，尽管我有同事会非常快地说，‘不，我不喜欢电影版的《西区故事》。’人们对此非常有热情。”

但还有其他剧院在纽约市，有些人并不了解。他说：“百老汇是真正的商业剧院中心，但还有那么多其他剧院，它们并不是那么高度商业化，并且它们更加自由，可以做更有趣、风险更高的演出。你可以去百老汇之外甚至百老汇之外，那里的演出甚至更少商业化，你可以看到那些更加冒险的演出。”

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