

Interview

The Producer

An Interview with Daryl Roth,
 Producer, Daryl Roth Productions



Daryl Roth

EDITORS' NOTE Daryl Roth is an independent theatrical producer working in New York who has the distinction of having produced an unprecedented six Pulitzer Prize-winning plays. She has received three Tony Awards and countless nominations. Roth serves on the boards of directors of the Lincoln Center Theater, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Roth has been profiled in *The New Yorker* and included in Crain's "100 Most Influential Women in NYC Business." Awards and honors she has received include the Foundation for Jewish Culture's Patron of the Arts Award, The Jewish Theological Seminary's Louis Marshall Award, the Albert Einstein College of Medicine Spirit of Achievement Award, the National Corporate Theatre Fund's Chairman Award, and the Tisch School of the Arts Award for Artistic Leadership. Dedicated to nurturing and supporting theater artists, the Daryl Roth Creative Spirit Award is given annually to an artist who has demonstrated exceptional talent and promise in his or her field.

COMPANY BRIEF Daryl Roth Productions (www.darylrothproductions.com) has produced more than 50 Broadway and off-Broadway plays and musicals since its first production in 1988. DRP has recently extended its reach into film and television. The Daryl Roth Theatre, which opened in 1996 in the landmark former Union Square Savings Bank in Union Square,

is home to the 299-seat main stage, the DR2, an intimate 99-seat theater that welcomes new plays as well as programming for young audiences, and the D-Lounge, a cozy setting appropriate for cabaret and comedy.

What is the key focus for Daryl Roth Productions, and what do you see as your primary mission?

My main mission as a theater producer is to look for new territory that perhaps has not been covered and to find new writers whose voices I find interesting, exciting, and fresh. It's thrilling to give a new playwright the chance to have his or her work showcased. Of course, it is my honor to have produced established playwrights such as Edward Albee and Tony Kushner. My focus for most of the 20 years I've been working has been dramatic plays. I love plays that have a strong female character at the core who faces challenges and has to make significant life decisions. Also, very important to me are issues of identity: religious, racial, or gender-based. I find myself drawn to plays that explore who we are as individuals as well as our role within a group or community. And of course, I love musicals and continue to produce those that have strong character-driven stories to tell.

Last year, I initiated a new program that is growing very nicely and has been well received by children, parents, and grandparents alike. The DR2 Kids Theatre Series hosts innovative works that offer an intimate atmosphere for new young audiences. Currently playing is a joyously delightful musical, *Dear Edwina*.

Broadway hosts a lot of revivals, as it tends to be challenging to find new, exciting material. Are you focused on helping the next generation of emerging writers, and is the talent out there?

I enjoy seeing revivals as an audience member, but it is not my personal choice to produce them. One exception has been the revival of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee because of a personal history I have producing plays by Mr. Albee. But I'd rather find playwrights whose work has been under the radar or find a play that will have its premier production.

Is the talent out there? Without question, but this is such a risky business, and it's more challenging now than it has ever been because of the economic climate. Many producers are

not willing to take the risk on new talent, but it gives me a special thrill. Of course it makes good sense to also work with people with whom you have a track record.

Do you know early on in the process of working on a new show if it's going to work, or are you sometimes surprised?

I'm very sure about what I love, and hopefully choose plays of high quality, though it doesn't guarantee that it will be a financial success by any means. Sometimes a play will catch the wind, and you will fly high, and you often don't know why that happens, but it's wonderful when it does. And there are times when you will produce what you feel is a wonderful play, it receives critical acclaim, and yet audiences don't come. So there is that big unknown quality in theater, and when it works it's breathtakingly fabulous and thrilling, and when it doesn't work, it's deeply depressing and disappointing. When you really love and believe in the work – and to be in this business you have to love and believe – you invest so much of your effort, time, and money as well as the emotional commitment, and the stakes are very high. As a producer, people are counting on me to make a success of their work, and I try my best with every new production.

Regardless of which industry we're referring to, the economic challenges are out there today. Have you seen a big impact in the theater, and how challenging is it in this market?

Like every industry, Broadway, and theater in general, is going to be challenged and will deeply feel the economic downturn. There are two ways it will be recognized: First, there will be those people who will choose not to invest in shows. Patronizing the arts has always been done with a generous spirit, and these economic times may make it necessary for people to reassess their level of generosity. Second is whether people will spend money to buy tickets to come see the shows. Also, tourism may drop a bit, and generally people will be seriously examining their spending habits.

That being said, I believe this is the time that we all need theater more than ever. We need that balm and to escape from the real world, and we yearn to be entertained and enlightened, and replenish our spirits in ways that only theater can do. ●