

Women Leaders

The Power of Theater

An Interview with Daryl Roth, Daryl Roth Productions



The cast of Kinky Boots

EDITORS' NOTE Daryl Roth is a theatrical producer working in New York who is proud to hold the singular distinction of producing seven Pulitzer Prize-winning plays: *Anna in the Tropics*; *August: Osage County* (2008 Tony Award); *Clybourne Park* (2012 Tony Award); *How I Learned to Drive*; *Proof* (2001 Tony Award); *Edward Albee's Three Tall Women*; and *Wit*. This season, she is represented by *Annie*; *Lucky Guy*; *The Testament of Mary*; and *Kinky Boots*, the new musical with book by Harvey Fierstein and music by Cyndi Lauper. Her more than 75 award-winning productions both on and off Broadway include *Caroline, or Change*; *Closer Than Ever*; *Curtains*; *De La Guarda*; *The Divine Sister*; *Driving Miss Daisy*; *Fela!*; *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* (Tony Award); *A Little Night Music*; *Nora Ephron and Delia Ephron's Love, Loss, and What I Wore*; *Mary Stuart*; *Medea*; *The Normal Heart* (Tony Award); *Old Wicked Songs*; *Our Lady of 121st Street*; *The Play About the Baby*; *Salome*; *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*; *The Temperamentals*; *Through the Night*; *Thurgood*; *Twilight*; *Los Angeles, 1992*; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; and *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Future projects include *A Time To Kill*, based on John Grisham's classic best seller and adapted by Rupert Holmes. Recent honors include *The Broadway Association's 2013 Visionary Leader Award*; *The Stella Adler 2012 Harold Clurman Spirit Award*; *the 2012 Family Equality Council Hostetter-Habib Family Award*; *The 2011 Live Out Loud Humanitarian Award*; and *the 2010 Lucille Lortel Lifetime Achievement Award*. Roth was twice included in *Crain's "100 Most Influential Women in Business."*



Daryl Roth

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Daryl Roth Productions (www.darylrothproductions.com; DRP) has produced more than 75 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, 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 secret formula to your success?

I choose projects I feel passionately about; a story that resonates with me and I hope will resonate with others. I am drawn to challenging subjects that others might shy away from. I like to explore issues of family dynamics, identity and gender, religion, and race. One of the responsibilities and joys of being a producer is that I have the opportunity to influence how people might see the world.

In tackling those sensitive issues, do you have to find a balance in appealing to a large group?

You do have to find the balance. Some of the plays I have done are intimate stories and belong off Broadway in more intimate settings. Others need a larger venue, and that's when Broadway is the right choice.

Seven years ago, I saw a screening of a small independent English film called *Kinky Boots*. I knew immediately it would translate into a wonderful musical. It deals with many subjects that are personal to me – the father-son relationship, people having the courage to be true to themselves, compassion, and acceptance. Even though it has developed into a fabulous Broadway musical, the heart of the story is an intimate one, about how it takes a courageous person to go on a journey of self-acceptance and ultimately accept other people.

Once I obtained the rights, my first call was to Harvey Fierstein, who I felt had the right sensibilities to adapt this story to the stage. I asked Jerry Mitchell to direct and choreograph, knowing he was the perfect person for this show, which needed uplifting staging and a bit of glitter and glam. The next important call was to Cyndi Lauper, inviting her to join the Dream Team. She was in sync with the story. It was also important for me to have a collaborative producing team, which we put together as well as an amazing group of designers.

The basic premise is this: Charlie Price has suddenly inherited his father's shoe factory, which is on the verge of bankruptcy. Trying to live up to his father's legacy and save his family business, Charlie finds inspiration in the form of Lola. A fabulous entertainer in need of some sturdy stilettos, Lola turns out to be the one person who can help Charlie become the man he's meant to be. As they work to turn the factory around, this unlikely pair

finds that they have more in common than they ever dreamed possible and discovers that when you change your mind about someone, you can change your whole world.

What we have on stage now, with people leaping to their feet every night, is my dream come true. This is the kind of theater I want to do: I want to be able to say things that help people in their lives, to give people something to wrap their hearts and heads around.

Does this show have a broad market?

I'm so happy to see how many people are coming to see the show and talk about coming back with their children. I would not have initially thought it a show for families, but there are issues *Kinky Boots* addresses, like bullying, accepting people who are different, and family in terms of how we honor our parents when we don't follow the road they've chosen for us – these are all lessons that people are never too young to learn.

Are young people getting that accessibility to arts and an understanding of the value of an arts education?

In an ideal world, there would be enough money allocated for these cultural arts in schools. Since, sadly, that is often not the case, it's up to the public and those who work in the arts to elevate and support the arts in schools. There are a lot of wonderful nonprofit theater companies in New York and other cities that have programs dedicated to going into schools and working with students. It is beholden upon commercial producers like myself to invite students to come and see our productions, and sometimes we can offer study guides and educational materials that will enhance their experience.

How do you reflect on the success of *Kinky Boots*?

Every day, my heart is full when I see how the show is being received by our audiences. People are moved to tears, and moments later, they are clapping and jumping out of their seats in a totally joyous way. There is a great line in the show: "You change the world when you change your mind." It's delivered by a factory worker who never thought he'd meet or accept a drag queen. The factory worker's journey has been one of acceptance, which is one of the major themes of the show that people take away with them.

I have always tried to use theatre to enlighten, educate, and of course, entertain. *Kinky Boots* seems to be accomplishing all of this with a fabulous story, music, and glam. ●