

A Passion For Theater

An Interview with Daryl Roth, Daryl Roth Productions

EDITORS' NOTE Daryl Roth is a 13-time Tony Award-winning Broadway producer and leading innovator in the American theater, with a career spanning over three decades. Credited with some of the most thought-provoking productions in New York City and throughout the world, Roth has brought to the stage the works of many of our greatest dramatists, including Edward Albee, Paula Vogel, and Nilo Cruz; has helped shepherd the careers of new playwrights; and is the force behind the Tony and Olivier Award winning Best Musical Kinky Boots. Roth holds the singular distinction of producing seven Pulitzer Prize-winning plays. She champions productions that connect to the wider world through the stories they tell, and is particularly drawn to themes that include issues of gender and identity, family dynamics, stories with strong women at the core, and those that reflect her Jewish heritage. Among the more than 130 shows she has produced both on and Off Broadway include Larry Kramer's seminal play about the AIDS crisis, *The Normal Heart* (2011 Tony Award); Paula Vogel's award-winning play *Indecent*; Nora Ephron and Delia Ephron's international hit play *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*; and Gloria: A Life, a play about the iconic Gloria Steinem. Her newest play is *Left on Tenth* by Delia Ephron, directed by Susan Stroman. Roth mentors early career producers, sharing her experience and advice as they forge their own paths. The Daryl Roth Theatre, the landmark Off-Broadway venue on Union Square, opened its unique main theater space in 1996 with the iconic *De La Guarda*, as well as other extraordinary productions including Derek DelGaudio's *In & Of Itself*; Hannah Gadsby's *Douglas*; *Gloria: A Life*; and *Cyrano*. It is currently home to the hit musical *Titanique*. The theater was the first performing arts venue to reopen its doors in post-pandemic New York with *Blindness*, which premiered in March 2021. In the intimate DR2 venue, Roth has presented such critically acclaimed shows as *All the Devils Are Here*; *Everything's Fine*; and *Accidentally Brave*. The DR2 Kids programming introduces its youngest patrons to the theater, with shows including *Dear Edwina*, *Paddington Bear*, and *The Very*



Daryl Roth

Hungry Caterpillar. Dedicated to supporting a number of nonprofit organizations, Roth is a Trustee of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and Lincoln Center Theater. Honors include The New Dramatists Outstanding Career Achievement Award; New York Living Landmarks Award; and the Lucille Lortel Lifetime Achievement Award. She was inducted into the 2017 Theatre Hall of Fame and named to Crain's 2019 "50 Most Powerful Women in New York."

Where did you develop your passion for the theater?

I fondly remember going to shows with my sister and my parents, who shared their love of musicals with us and instilled an appreciation for the theater. We lived in New Jersey so we were close enough to see things on Broadway and, of course, enjoyed local theater as well. Once I was a teenager, I developed my passion for reading plays. That opened up a wonderful

world for me and introduced me to playwrights and stories that fascinated me from that point on.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I had such a passion for theater and saw as much as I could, but since I had no aspirations or talent to be an actor, playwright, director or designer, I did not see an avenue open to me in those days. I actually did not understand what a producer's job was or even that there was such an opportunity. But as time went on, I kept thinking about how I might find my way into the world that I loved so dearly. It was not until my early 40s when I joined the Board of City Center that I found my "way in." At that time, they were beginning to create what ultimately became the beloved Encores series, successful to this day. I learned a lot from that experience and met some wonderful and creative people who helped me open the doors I needed to begin producing. Richard Maltby and David Shire invited me to hear some songs they had written at a small cabaret downtown. I was so taken with every song



Opening night of *Left on Tenth* – Left to right: Julianna Margulies, Delia Ephron, Daryl Roth, Susan Stroman, Peter Gallagher

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which I felt spoke directly to me, they were all about life changes, going through doors that could lead to new chapters in life, and being brave enough to take that chance. I asked them if I could try my hand at producing it, and they gave me that opportunity. It became a wonderful musical review by Maltby and Shire called *Closer Than Ever*, my very first production which ran for nine months at the Cherry Lane Theatre, so I like to consider it “the birth” of my career. That was in 1989, and it has been performed across the country and around the world ever since.

From there, I found myself drawn to plays dealing with challenging subjects or perhaps those not as commercial for others to produce, and that became my niche. I loved finding plays by new writers, stories about strong women, family dynamics, gender, and of course, my Jewish heritage. That tapestry has held true for the more than 35 years I have been producing.

How do you define the role of a producer?

When asked what is the job of a producer, I often answer that a producer is a facilitator of other peoples’ dreams and that in the process, they might be lucky enough to fulfill their own. Basically, a producer finds the material, puts the creative team together, raises the money, and begins developing it through readings and workshops. When ready for the stage, it is important to perhaps find a theater out of town before bringing it to New York. The team then grows exponentially, and includes management, advertising, press, and an extended village of people working with the goal in mind of making the production a success. I like to say that a producer is the first person to believe – and the last to give up.

What led to the newest play you are producing, *Left on Tenth*, and what can theatergoers expect from the play?

I first met Delia Ephron, the writer of *Left on Tenth*, when I produced the play *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*, which she wrote with her sister Nora. It ran for three years Off Broadway and was a very special and unique experience that we shared. We stayed in touch, and when Delia wrote her memoir about finding love again, and the left turns that her life took because of health challenges, she came to me and asked if I thought the story could be adapted as a play. I did, and the adventure began.

Theatergoers can expect what I like to say is a “romantic comedy for a certain generation,” with all of the complications, joy, fear, and excitement that comes with finding romantic love later in life. Delia’s journey touches on everything that is most important: our relationships with our friends and family, the need for bravery and hope in our daily lives – and borrowing her own title, the most powerful emotions of all, love and loss. We found the perfect director in the incomparable Susan Stroman, and have an incredible cast: Julianna Margulies, Peter Gallagher, Peter Francis James and Kate MacCluggage. We are running through early February at the James Earl Jones Theatre.

What are the key ingredients you look for when deciding whether to get involved with a project?

Productions come to me in different ways and at different stages of their development. Sometimes it’s from an original idea, sometimes it will be a matter of commissioning a playwright to adapt a book, film, article, or life rights for which I would option the property. I may see a reading or regional production that resonates with me that I want to help take to the next step. And more often than not, it’s a submission from a playwright or their agent asking if I would consider producing the work.

As I mentioned earlier, I find myself gravitating towards material that deals with those things I care most about – family dynamics, women’s stories, LGBTQ+ narratives, and, of course, my Jewish identity. I like to find stories that we haven’t heard before or are told in a new way that explore our common humanity, celebrate our differences, foster understanding, and can even change one’s perspective on something, as in *Kinky Boots*.

Has there been progress made when it comes to improving gender equality for women in theater?

It is definitely a more welcoming world for women than when I entered the field, and I have felt and seen incredible progress in the last ten years or so, particularly with more women joining the ranks of producers, directors, and in the design fields. But there is always room for growth, and I believe we owe it to each other to mentor and encourage women coming up in the field. We also need to expand the community of people we work with, which will help more women have a seat at the table.

With all that you have achieved during your career, what are you most proud of?

Without question, I am most proud of my own family, my children, my grandchildren, and the people they are. They have strong moral values, are smart, make good judgments, and most importantly, are kind, loving, and giving.

Professionally there are so many shows I hold dear. I would have to say *Kinky Boots*, *Wit*, *Three Tall Women*, *Indecent*, and the revival of *The Normal Heart* do stand out for me because of the place they hold in our culture and in the many lives they have touched and minds they have changed.

Are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to reflect on your success?

I love all aspects of the process so much, even though there are days the challenges seem insurmountable. And while I feel blessed by the career I have had and the artists I have collaborated with, I always want to strive to do more and do better. I try not to rest on my laurels, but am always looking to the next project and hopefully the next three after that, as well. But every day, I try to remember how lucky I am to be doing what I love, surrounded by people I admire and respect.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in pursuing a career in the theater?

It is important, almost mandatory, to see as much theater as you can to develop your own tastes. Read plays to become familiar with the playwrights you respond to. Learn as much as you can about all different aspects and job opportunities within the theater industry. There are so many ways to use your talents and skills in order to be involved in a community that you are passionate about. Passion is the keyword here. It’s a very challenging and risky business and you must have great love, dedication, and tenacity before jumping in.

Don’t be afraid to fail – you will, it’s part of the process. Just know that life is always about hills and valleys. So, enjoy the hills and learn from the valleys, stay true to yourself and your own taste, don’t listen to the noise or the naysayers. Believe in the project and believe in yourself. And always be kind and respectful to everyone you meet along the way.

See you at the theater! ●