

Musical Theatre in Chicago

A CONVERSATION WITH LILI-ANNE BROWN,
LINDA FORTUNATO + ELIZABETH MARGOLIUS

MODERATED BY MOLLY MARINIK

While Chicago might be best known for its theatres producing straight plays, the city also maintains a strong and growing musical theatre scene, partly due to the artists who passionately produce musical works for Chicago's audiences. To learn more about the great musical theatre being made in Chicago, dramaturg Molly Marinik talked with theatremakers Lili-Anne Brown, Linda Fortunato, and Elizabeth Margolius about what it takes to bring musicals to the stage and why it's so important to reach gender parity in the stories that are told and among the artists who are telling them.



Elizabeth Margolius is a stage and movement director. Her most recent production, *The Scarlet Ibis*, opened at Chicago Opera Theater in February and her next production, *Queen of the Mist*, opens with Firebrand Theatre in May.

Linda Fortunato is Artistic Director at Theatre at the Center in Munster, IN. She also works as an actor, freelance director, and teacher (Columbia College Chicago, Loyola University, and others).

Lili-Anne Brown is from Chicago's South Side. Her next season includes directing new plays at Goodman Theatre and La Jolla Playhouse, and a musical at Drury Lane Oakbrook.

MOLLY MARINIK | How do you identify as musical theatre artists? I know you are hyphenates in the sense that you do lots of things, so I'm curious how musical theatre plays into your artistic careers.

LINDA FORTUNATO | I consider myself, as you say, someone who wears many different hats, and I am certainly not exclusively in musical theatre. I am probably about 50/50 musical theatre and straight theatre. I started as an actor and then branched into choreography then directing, and now sort of balance between all three.

LILI-ANNE BROWN | I'm pretty much the same thing. I started out as an actor, primarily doing music theatre when I started, but obviously not exclusively. I was in a lot of different companies and I was doing casting a lot—I was the casting director at a theatre that did a lot of musicals, but not all musicals. Then I was an artistic director of a company that did straight plays and musicals but was more known for the musicals. Now I do both.

ELIZABETH MARGOLIUS | I also started out as an actor and singer/flautist, and moved into directing some years ago. I almost exclusively direct musicals, opera, and operetta, although I'll direct a play once a year or so.

MOLLY | Do you find that, as Chicago artists, once you moved into the musical theatre world you became known as that type of artist and the work made itself available to you because people identified you in that way?

LILI-ANNE | I don't know about "makes itself available," but I do know about being pigeonholed.

MOLLY | That's a better way to say it.

LILI-ANNE | Yeah, I do know about being pigeonholed as a music theatre person. Not that a musical theatre person is a bad thing to be. I love telling stories with music. It's my favorite thing. If you see a play of mine, I will have found some way to put music in it. But I don't like that people want to stick you in one genre. Especially when it is a more difficult genre to navigate. I think with musical theatre, or really anything that's a smaller market or a specialization, so to speak, now you're dealing with less work and a crowded field, perhaps.

LINDA | I would agree with that, and I think just because you do one doesn't mean you want to do the other. I think that's part of the pigeonholing. Some people want to specialize in only plays or only musicals, but I certainly think that in Chicago, there's more room for crossover than maybe some other places.

I feel that it happens with actors as well. When I first moved to town you were either a musical theatre actor or you did straight plays. And there was very little crossover. Now, healthily and happily, that is less true.

ELIZABETH | When I first began directing in Chicago, I feel it helped to have a pretty singular focus in contemporary/new musical work. As the years have gone on, I have opened up that focus and have been asked to work on opera/operetta/

plays, but all with the knowledge that finding the musicality and movement of any piece is one of my strengths.

MOLLY | I'm curious about how your work as a director of straight plays informs your work as a musical theatre director.

LILI-ANNE | They're not binary like that to me. I treat all the work the same.

LINDA | I agree. I don't approach them any differently, personally.

ELIZABETH | I agree as far as the material. I think whether it's a play or a musical or an operetta, I approach it all the same.

MOLLY | How does musical theatre function in Chicago? It's such a bustling theatre scene, with the storefront theatres and this amazing artistic community. How does musical theatre play into that?

LILI-ANNE | This is good, because I think you're going to get three completely different viewpoints. I have found that because musical theatre costs three times more than straight plays do, already we're dealing with a situation of having fewer producers and needing to have a certain kind of access to space. Musical theatre generally needs more space—not always—but you do have to think about musicians and sometimes space to dance, if that's in the show. You need a proper space that is acoustically sound. You need a space where performers can safely dance.

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– Linda Fortunato



So it's about resources, right? It's a smaller field and sometimes can be a very money-driven field that one has to navigate. But not always; there's storefront too, and that's what's really exciting. I've almost exclusively done storefront musical theatre and tried to make that great and high quality. Because before, it was exclusively the province of these large suburban houses. Once in a while, one of the larger houses would do a musical. Then there were these few—you could count on one hand—smaller storefront companies that were doing musicals. I think it's definitely expanding now.

LINDA | I would agree with that, and I also think that—exactly what Lili-Anne was saying about the accessibility, about the availability, about where you're doing the musical—really informs how you're going to do the musical. That is part of what's really exciting about musical theatre in Chicago: it is not just cookie-cutter, one brand of musical theatre. There are different companies,

not only based on size and on budget but also on location and audience and accessibility, that allow artists to put their own stamp on how they do musical theatre, which I find very exciting. It's not just 20 commercial houses that are recreating Broadway productions.

ELIZABETH | Absolutely. I agree. That's my experience as well. Most of my work in musical theatre has been in the storefronts of Chicago. To me, the storefronts are doing some of the most exciting work. It's the storefronts that are often more open to approaching musicals in new ways and will take a chance on a new piece no one has ever seen before. That for me has been so exciting because it gives more opportunities to theatre artists when they're just starting out and beyond.

MOLLY | Do you feel, with the larger lens on opportunities to create musicals, that people are gravitating toward developing new work? Or that they're reviving the things they're interested in that have already been produced?

Lili-Anne: In Chicago, we definitely don't have enough new musical work. It's because of that money factor we were talking about. I think people are risk-averse, and producing new work is considered "risky," and so creating new musical theatre is considered even more risky and a lot of people don't want to spend the money and take the chance. There just isn't a lot of development of new musicals. I think we all lament that.

LINDA | Absolutely.

ELIZABETH | A decade ago, when I was first moving into all of this, there seemed to be more opportunities for working on developing new musicals. Maybe that was because there were more places in Chicago that were solely

committed to producing, encouraging, and developing new musical work. It does seem like there's less of that now. There certainly are those theatres doing their best to put money toward development, but it's risky, and I definitely wish there were more. I think the bottom line is that the "larger" theatres feel they must cater to their audiences—and sometimes that means another revival of that musical everyone has heard of.

MOLLY | In support of the musical theatre community on the whole, can you talk a little bit about the resources that are available?

LILI-ANNE | Well, Elizabeth and I work with Firebrand, which is exclusively musical theatre. It's feminist musical theatre because when Harmony [France] started the company, she wanted it to have a feminist mission. I think many women in theatre had been having conversations about the Bechdel test, and Harmony wanted to really put that through some rigor. So Firebrand is about a love of musical theatre, but putting women at the forefront, to be behind the table and on the stage in majority numbers.

ELIZABETH | To add on to that, as far as Firebrand goes, the company is also willing to consider musicals that may not be often produced. Lili-Anne just directed *Caroline or Change*, and I'm directing *Queen of the Mist* next spring. So I [could] bring Harmony several different shows on my wish list that many theatres wouldn't even dream of considering.

MOLLY | I imagine that as Firebrand was getting started, you all had conversations about the lack of feminist musicals out there. Was it beyond what you anticipated?

LILI-ANNE | Oh, you have no idea. I remember a particularly hilarious Facebook post that said, "What are musicals about women?" or, "What are feminist musicals?" Just to see what people would say. It got a hundred or more responses. People would say things like, "*Nine*. Because it's all these women and one man." We were like, "No. You don't understand. The whole musical is about that man. So that is not a feminist musical." Even the concept people didn't grasp. I think it takes a lot for people to start understanding what putting women first and putting them at the top even means.

MOLLY | With the idea that step one is just getting people to recognize what a feminist musical means, what are the longer-term goals of where the Chicago musical theatre scene can go with all of that newly awakened awareness?

LINDA | At this point, my affiliation with Firebrand is simply as an enthusiastic audience member, and I'm friends with many of the fabulous artists who are creating what's going on. So for me, not having been a part of a company but having watched the company start

to develop and succeed and be doing really exciting things expands the conversation for everybody.

Not every theatre in the Chicago community is going to change what they're doing, but maybe there's an awareness. As people are selecting seasons, there might be a thought of, "Oh, but what about this show?" or, "Oh, if we're going to do a Golden Age musical, how about a show that has a woman character who is not just there because of the man?"

LILI-ANNE | I think showing the teams makes a difference too. *Caroline or Change* is the first all-female team that I've ever worked with or even seen in my whole life. When we all had our first production meeting, everybody looked around and said, "This has never happened in my career." I just hadn't seen anything like that.

ELIZABETH | Wow, that's huge.

LILI-ANNE | Yeah, to even have it be a majority of women is great.

LINDA | I directed a production of *The Tin Woman* at Theatre at the Center two years ago. The entire design team and director were women. We did the same thing when we sat down in the production meeting. Not that we work any differently as a result of it—it's just really refreshing to be able to have all of those voices in the room at the same time.

LILI-ANNE | I think we work a little differently.

LINDA | Shh! You'll share the secrets.

MOLLY: Can you talk about the advantage of cultivating the careers of women in theatre? In addition to putting focus on the idea that women are valuable players in the industry, how does your own work support the community at large?

LILI-ANNE | For me, it's mostly about mentoring. How my work supports the community at large

is A: there's an example being provided, B: I'm hiring women, C: I'm mentoring women. And I'm hiring women who are also mentoring women. So it's like, "Let's get them all in." During *Caroline or Change*, people kept asking me if they could bring friends to rehearsal. I said, "Come one, come all." You never knew who was going to turn up. And it was fine—we got everybody's permission who was in the room, and everybody was comfortable about that and excited. Sometimes you'd just look around and there'd be someone in the corner just watching what we were doing and getting the vibe. I think it's exciting that people wanted to experience what was happening and get inspired.

ELIZABETH | Definitely, I would agree with that. Mentoring is so important to me. Supporting women who are working to become working directors—as well as performers, designers, etc. I also think that having stories about strong, unique, multifaceted women makes a difference. I hope it does.

I'm so accustomed to being surrounded in the room by a lot of men—especially in the opera world, where I think it's much slower as far as change goes. There are predominantly men in the room. I want to believe that it's slowly changing, as far as how we're seen and how we're treated—all of it.

MOLLY | That's really encouraging and very exciting. I bet it was so rewarding to work on *Caroline or Change* in that environment, too.

LINDA | I bet it was very empowering.

LILI-ANNE | It definitely was an amazingly supportive and energized vibe in that room. I think I found that, and I felt the same with *Marie Christine*. I think when there's a show that is led by a woman in a purposeful way and that is really focused on a woman, a female character or female characters, you can really extract an energy. Even from men, that changes them. I have found the process to be transformational for the men who are in it

also, and I find that really moving too.

I've watched many men give space in a way that felt purposeful. You're watching it and you're like, "Oh, I can watch this man's wheels turning." I can see him [think], "I need to shut up right now," or, "I need to step aside and give the field to these women." I've really watched that dawn on people both on stage and behind the table. And that's really great. It's a good feeling.

MOLLY | Thank you for articulating that too. That's a really fantastic secondary bonus.

LILI-ANNE | Yeah, a secondary bonus, but we need that, right? As in, that's who's going to make the change. If men are dominating or holding the purse strings, or in charge of a lot of institutions and they can't make a mission change, then we're stuck, yeah? So if we make the change and then spread it out, I mean, that's allyship.

ELIZABETH | I also think we don't know what we don't know, a lot of the time. I'm still thinking about how *Nine* was suggested as a feminist piece, because on the one hand, I understand the idea that, "Oh, it's primarily a female cast, so of course..."—forgetting that the entire piece revolves around a man. I wonder if a woman suggested *Nine*. I think there are some people who maybe just don't have a comprehensive understanding of all of this. I am still learning myself. I just think it's a lot more complicated and layered than we might realize. If that makes any sense.

LILI-ANNE | It makes all the sense, Elizabeth.



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LINDA | I think it's among the audience, as well. An audience might not realize, “Oh, I haven't ever seen a musical with a woman as the central character,” or “I haven't ever seen something told from this perspective.” And maybe it's conscious, maybe it's not.

ELIZABETH | Absolutely. And it's tough. You try not to judge and realize that we can make a change by just suggesting someone look at things differently. That's a great thing.

MOLLY | Why do you love being a director in Chicago? What you get out of the community that is special and unique and important?

LINDA | There's a lot. Chicago is a very supportive community. Although it's a very large theatre community, it feels small. You're always just one step away from someone else, whether an actor you've worked with or a previous collaborator. You're seeing shows of people you know, you're crossing paths [with] people whose work you've admired, and that makes it really rich to have that closeness within the community. And as a result, I feel like it's a positive place to work. I have seen it happen that people who have an ego or a negative “It's all about me” attitude—they don't last that long here. It's really about the community. That's why we do theatre, because it's a collaborative art, and we can't do it by ourselves. That's what makes it so rich.

LILI-ANNE | I'm from Chicago. I love Chicago. Like Linda said, community is the key word. I think that anytime people talk about Chicago and Chicago theatre, you hear the word community over and over because we just have such a strong sense of that.

ELIZABETH | I was born and raised on the East Coast, but I always say that I grew up and continue to grow up in the theatre in Chicago. People have been so supportive and giving with opportunities and advice and mentoring. It's just a great city to do theatre in. It really is.

LINDA | The other thing I love about Chicago is the differences in the theatres, the institutions. That from the storefront theatre to the large houses with large budgets, there's such a varied scope of what's done here. And I think that that variety informs the work. I know for me it does.

When I'm directing a show at a storefront theatre that maybe doesn't have as many resources, as opposed to thinking of those things as obstacles, the thing I love is to embrace them. Okay, so we can't have projections. Okay, great—how do we tell this story? It distills things down to storytelling, which is why we do it in the first place. It forces you as a director, as a designer, as an actor to really focus on the storytelling. And then, when you take that mode of thinking to a larger theatre that maybe has a larger budget and

more resources, you're still looking at things from that “Let's tell this story” place, which is hopefully how you're always looking at things. I think that because Chicago has all those levels of theatres and institutions, it really affects the way we tell stories.

LILI-ANNE | I think I'd like to see more women running theatres that are doing musical theatre. Because right now, is it just Linda and Harmony? I think so. So there's that. I didn't want to leave without having said that. Because that's important to me. We are in a field that is more expensive and I think that has always affected who's in charge and who's on the staff—and therefore who's picking the material and what they pick.

So when you look at why we even need to have this conversation and why we get to celebrate now at the beginning of a change, it is because of patriarchy and because it's affected musical theatre more than any other genre of theatre. And I think that has a lot to do with money and who's trusted with that much money to be in charge of how it's spent.

ELIZABETH | Agreed. I will add that Underscore Theatre also exclusively produces new musicals and is being run primarily by women. So, it's happening—one theatre at a time.

LILI-ANNE | That's great to know. That's awesome.

