

STAGES

Women in charge of Lyric Stage's 'Ain't Misbehavin'

By **Joel Brown** Globe Correspondent, November 18, 2011, 12:00 a.m.

How often do two women end up in creative control of a musical on one of Boston's top stages? The women in charge of the current Lyric Stage Company of Boston production of "Ain't Misbehavin'" pause for a beat to think about it.

"Actually, almost never," says director and choreographer Josie Bray.

"Not so often," agrees music director Catherine Stornetta.

It's not exactly unprecedented. The Lyric notes that its production of "Crowns" back in 2005 had a female director and a female music director. The American Repertory Theater production of "The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess" this season was directed by Diane Paulus and conducted by Sheilah Walker, although the choreographer and music supervisor were men. But in queries to several major area theaters, those were the only examples that came up.

"I'm so used to being in a room with all men," Bray says.

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“I have worked with women directors before, but it’s a rarity, and for my position, as music director, it’s even much more rare,” says Stornetta.

The inequality is real, but thinking about it doesn’t help a woman get jobs, Bray says. “We just show up and do the work,” she says.

“I made her scones one time, which doesn’t always happen with other music directors,” says Stornetta, who went to graduate school at the New England Conservatory and began working professionally in the 1970s. She’s often on the road with “Forbidden Broadway,” “Forbidden Hollywood,” or some other show for months at a time. “[But] it isn’t about your gender. As it should be, it’s about how do you choreograph and direct. And I find her work really interesting, which is nice because I’m not going, ‘Awww, she’s cute, but, God, what an idiot.’ ”

“And Catherine’s the real deal,” says Bray. “I would say we’re definitely setting a collaborative tone, and I’m not sure if that is or is not related to us being women, because I’ve never been a man, so I don’t know.”

Bray earned undergraduate and graduate degrees at Emerson College, spending a decade in Boston before moving to New York. After four years there, she recently returned, planning to base herself here with her husband and son but work in both cities.

Bray's mentor of late has been director and choreographer Marcia Milgrom Dodge, who two years ago, with "Ragtime," became the first woman to direct a major musical at the Kennedy Center in Washington. Bray worked for Dodge on that production, which moved to Broadway. (There, too, female directors are scarce, but they used to be scarcer: The Tony Award for best director of a musical went to a woman, Julie Taymor, for the first time in 1998.)

"[Dodge] always tells me, 'It's such a boys' club, it's such a boys' club, it's such a boys' club.' But certainly I know lots of directors my age who are women," says Bray, who is in her early 30s but declines to be more specific.

In recent decades, she says, more colleges and universities offered theater majors, and now a generation of women who have paid their professional dues as assistant or associate directors are getting their chance to move up.

Sitting on cafe chairs in front of the Lyric's multilevel set - designed by David Towlun and complete with piano-key proscenium arch - Bray and Stornetta talked, too, about the musical, which runs through Dec. 17. Premiered in 1978, "Ain't Misbehavin'" features Fats Waller's great American songs and others associated with him in a five-person show that is often presented as a straightforward revue.

Bray's concept asks a little more than that from cast members Calvin Braxton, Lovely Hoffman, Robin Long, Davron S. Monroe, and Lori Tishfield.

“What we’ve done is keep it in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, but instead of just locating the show in a theater onstage, we’re giving them some backstage life,” Bray says. “Some of the numbers take place in the dressing rooms. You can see that the set is designed so you can see backstage.”

Lots of research on club performers’ lives in Harlem in the 1920s and ’30s has informed their approach. Often there was only a minimal distinction between the stage and the backstage area, requiring a little added suspension of disbelief.

“So that’s how we’ve designed the show,” Bray says. “There are moments that are sort of private, where they’re singing to each other, and moments that are created as performance for the paying audience.”

Which character sings which song, who’s onstage when, and how the roles are played shape whatever character moments the audience might discern in the plotless show.

“It makes it easier for the actors to hang their songs on some kind of scaffolding, so they have a reason to sing rather than just, ‘Oh, it’s my time to sing a song.’ It makes it more interesting for all of us involved and hopefully therefore to the audience,” says Stornetta.

In the Lyric’s relatively intimate space, the singers are unmiked. Stornetta will be on a raised area in the rear, playing piano in a band that also features clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, trombone, stand-up bass, and drums.

“If you look at the songs, they would all work in a cabaret setting, but many of them are very heartfelt and internal,” Stornetta says. “Fats Waller - the stereotype of him is the rolling eyes, and the amazing piano-playing, and the stride in his left hand. But the songs have real heart. And it’s hard not to be drawn in.”

Odd and 'Untitled'

A couple of notable dance events hit area stages this weekend.

Saturday and Sunday evenings, the Dance Complex closes out its 20th-anniversary celebrations with simultaneous premieres in three venues at the Odd Fellows Hall, 536 Massachusetts Ave., in Central Square, Cambridge. A highlight will have to be “A Brief History of the Dance Complex,” written and directed by founder Rozann Kraus. This “frolic” through the history touches on litigation and evictions, with several in-jokes embedded. Among other performances, Prometheus Dance will present excerpts from “Heart of the Matter,” an evening-length work in progress. A fourth studio will have selected photos and video footage by visual artist Charles Daniels. Tickets are \$20, and reservations are suggested. Call 617-547-9363.

Meanwhile, today through Sunday, Summer Stages Dance at Concord Academy and the Institute of Contemporary Art present the world premiere of Trajal Harrell and Sarah Sze’s “The Untitled Still Life Collection” at the museum, 100 Northern Ave. The performance takes place in an intimate gallery where “hanging sculptures of delicate line provide an excellent foil for Sze and Harrell, whose performance integrates the movement of bodies and objects through space,” says David Henry, the ICA’s director of public programs. Tickets are free with museum admission, but capacity is extremely limited. Reservations and information are at www.icaboston.org.

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