

Manhattan Digest

Entertainment, Fashion, Gossip and so much more.

Judith Ann Abrams: Broadway Baby with the Midas Touch

By Ryan Leeds / May 18, 2014



If you've been an avid theater-goer within the last 15 years, there is a high probability that you've reaped the rewards of Judith Ann Abrams' hard work. Since 1999, this multiple Tony Award winning producer helped Annie Oakley "get lost in his arms" in 1999's revival of *Annie Get Your Gun*. A few years later, in 2006, she made adolescent angst cool with Duncan Sheik's smash hit *Spring Awakening*. Currently, she is represented on Broadway with three hugely successful musicals: As a producer, she is keeping "Sex in the Heel" with *Kinky Boots*, creating a knockout romance

for Adrian and her boxing beau in this season's Tony nominated *Rocky*, and she has invested her own money into the "miracle" of *Matilda*. Across the pond in London's West End, Abrams is hysterically swindling millionaires in a re-imagined musical production of *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, which she is producing and hoping to bring to Broadway. It seems as though every project she has touched has turned to gold.

One might think that Abrams has had more advantages than others in the business. As the extended niece of radio, stage, and television star Molly Goldberg, and the cousin of Howard Merrill, one of the top comedy writers in television, it might be easy to assume that she has had a "leg up". Quite the opposite is true. Her family actually dissuaded her from getting into the business. She jokes that they told her to "go be a nurse". "If you're from an entertainment background", she said, "you either really get into it, or you run far away from it. I chose to get into it." She is quick to point out that she was adamant about wanting to prove herself without nepotism. Yet she is also humble enough to acknowledge where it all derived. Abrams credits her success to being blessed, having good luck, and taking guidance from great mentors like Helen Hayes, Richard Rodgers, and Hal Prince.

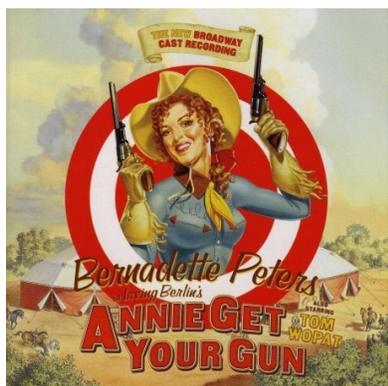
A native New Yorker, Abrams was a journalism major in Washington DC, where she became part of *College News Conference*, a Peabody Award winning show on ABC television. Her father worked in public relations and she was able to interview all of the top political figures one could imagine (including the Kennedys). After her third year in school, tragedy struck when her father suddenly died. She and her brother moved back to New York where she took a job at Long Island's Westbury Music Fair. She began first as a receptionist, and later became their casting director for Music Fair Enterprises. Abrams noticed that the family shows were selling out, which was big deal for the 3,000 seat house. She presented the idea of having a separate family theater to management, which got the savvy would-be producer into some hot water. "Ironically, after I proved what they were losing by using their own numbers, they fired me for looking at their box office statement!" she recalls. She went back to work in television, taking a role at ABC. Months later, the big Whigs at Westbury called Abrams back and said, "Listen, big shot, you wanna try this family theater business? We'll see if you're right."

It was then that the Pixie Judy Troupe was born. Recruiting adult Broadway actors, Abrams chose to accept her mission. That first summer, her children's theater sold 6,000 tickets a day. Before she knew it, there were 6 children's theater companies on the road. She describes her early days with the troupe: "At first, I wanted to get away from the name because I thought it sounded baby-like, but then the *New York Times* featured us writing: "Don't let that cutie-pie name keep you away. This troupe knows what family theater is all about. Good Tunes, professional acting and Pizzazz!" Subsequently, her theater became an "in" thing. Housed across the street from Carnegie Hall, the NY company attracted the likes of Elaine Stritch, who directed Abrams' production of *Tom Sawyer*. Stritch even filled in for the role of Aunt Polly once.



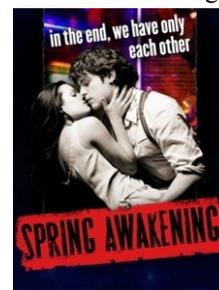
Richard Rodgers also paid her a visit. One night after the show, Rodgers came backstage and offered his support: "I just love what you're trying to do for kids", he said. "If there is anything at all I can do to help, please call me." The next day, a financially strapped Abrams called him pleading, "Help! I can't pay the rent this month!" So the Broadway legend wrote a check and helped her finance a trip to London, where she was able to produce 3 original cast recordings of her shows with the London Symphony Orchestra. Rodgers did the liner notes and the visibility of the troupe skyrocketed. "In those days," Abrams reminisced, "I wondered what people like him saw in me. But I realized that I must be doing something special if people of this calibre were getting involved in our theater for kids; I knew that we must be on the right road." It was indisputably a right road. Her traveling companies played high profile theaters around the country, in London, and at the White House for the children of two Presidents.

At the same time, the powerhouse producing duo, Barry and Fran Weissler had their own theater for children. Together, the Weisslers and Abrams, along with other producers of family theater companies, were responsible for shaping the TYA (Theater for Young Audiences) contract. It was an unprecedented stepping-stone, which helped to protect the interests of children's theater actors.



A few years later, Abrams attended a benefit where she reconnected with the Weisslers, who were also in attendance. She had been wanting to produce a show for adult audiences and learned that they would be producing *Annie Get Your Gun*. Abrams expressed her interest in joining their venture by becoming an associate producer and the second chapter of her career was born. The show won two TONY Awards: one for best revival, and the other for leading lady Bernadette Peters.

One show led to another and in 2006, *Spring Awakening* caught her eye. "There was something in that show which really spoke to me," she observed. The coming of age rock musical swept the TONY's that year, taking home 8 of its 11 nominations. "After that I didn't produce anything for 6 years. Nothing spoke to me," she said, "In one year, 3 of the 5 shows I turned down never even made it to Broadway."

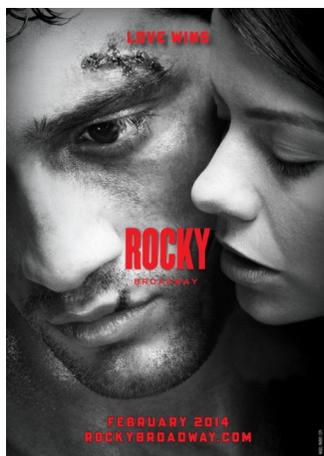


In 2012, Abrams found a new pair of shoes in Chicago, Illinois, where she caught Harvey Fierstein's Broadway bound adaptation of a British movie about a failing shoe factory and an unlikely queen who would save it. "There was also something in that show which really spoke to me. I thought that if they made the changes that needed to be made before it came to New York, it would be a smash hit—and thank God it was!" Abrams instincts were once again spot on. In 2013, the feel good *Kinky Boots* sashayed home from the TONY Awards with 6 awards and continues to pack the A1 Hirschfeld Theater on a nightly basis.

Abrams offered some insight into what attracts her to quality theater: "It's called *entertainment*, and I think people *should* be entertained. Times are tough right now with terrorism and other depressing things wearing us down. People want to get away from that. To me, there's more of an emphasis on the *show* in show business. It *is* a business, but I think that if something resonates, people respond to that." She continued, "If someone can walk out of theater after a couple of hours and think thoughts like, 'Wow! I didn't have to worry about how I'll get my kid to college', that is something really special that we have the ability to do. People love *Kinky Boots* because they walk out feeling terrific, and we've had the same recent experience with *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* in London."



Abrams also points towards good writing as an incentive to invest, applauding *Kinky Boots* author Harvey Fierstein. "I have such respect for him," she said. "He'll hit issues that are so gut wrenching but yet you walk out of the theater feeling great. Once you get home and start thinking about them, you realize the depth of the message. I think that is a great gift for a writer to have."



Next month, one of Abrams more recent projects will go head to head at Radio City Music Hall for the 68th annual TONY Awards. *Rocky*, the Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty musical, is nominated 4 times. Abrams described how she jumped into the financial ring to support the well known story of an underdog boxer turned champion: "My business partner, Adam Blanshay had seen it in Germany and said, 'This is unbelievable.' So I took his word for it. Then, I had friends in Europe who were calling me. They were also telling me that it was absolutely unbelievable." She continues to describe her excitement for it: "I've never seen anything staged like this. It's an event. I don't think—unless you really go to see it—that you can understand. Something happens in that theater (Winter Garden) that is just extraordinary!"

What's next for this tireless producer? "That's a good question," she smiles. "But it has to really touch my heart. I think I'd like to work with my business partner to become Lead Producers on a project. By that, I mean I'd want to own the rights." She admires the latest revival of *Cabaret*. "Shows like that are the kind of shows you want to do." People ask, "Why do they keep doing revivals?" "Well," she says, "most of them are pretty damn good. I mean, who is writing like that anymore? It's not all that easy to look for a new property."

She also envisions new breath for the Pixie Judy Troupe, citing "a void in this city for quality, professional family theater, where parents don't have to drop \$100 per ticket." She pictures an immersive experience, but only in the proper venue. "I'd like a place where kids can get the whole feeling of theater...where they can have a theater themed birthday party by trying on costumes, learning about the show, and then seeing it."

One thing is certain; if Abrams comes around knocking on your door for money, you can rest assured she is committed to the work. "I put money in myself," she told me, "Because it's not right to ask people for money if you don't believe in it yourself." She wisely avoids involving family and friends in her business deals.

It's been a challenging, but fulfilling for this veteran Producer. By now viewed as a Broadway expert. "Since I'm involved with three consecutive shows on Broadway, I have people calling me asking me what show they should see." She laughs and replies, "As long as it's *Matilda*, *Rocky* or *Kinky Boots*, I'm ok with that!" In a way, she surpassed her family's casual suggestion to "go be a nurse." She went a few steps beyond by becoming a doctor of entertainment-dispensing good theatre medicine to those desperate for some much needed escapism.

2014 Manhattan Digest. All rights reserved - ManhattanDigest, LLC

