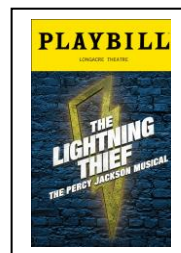
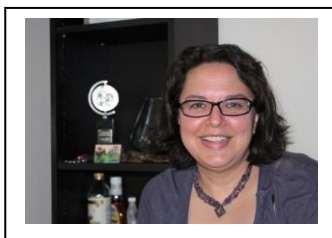
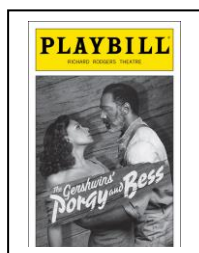


MEREDITH LUCIO

PRODUCER

March 23, 2017



I first met Meredith Lucio many years ago when I was a graduate student in the Texas Tech Ph.D. program and she was an undergraduate student. In all honesty, we didn't connect much back then as to a certain extent we lived in two different worlds. There were however certain students in the program one noticed for various reasons. Students were talented, competitive and tenacious even amongst the politics of academe. She had "spunk" as Ed Asner's character of Lou Grant might say. Therefore, it was no surprise to learn of her success in a very difficult industry, but as a producer? And a Tony Award-winning producer at that? Very cool.

It was a pleasure to catch up in her office in the Big Apple and also at lunch after so many years and for Meredith to share a bit of her knowledge and experience. Information that I am hopeful a young student may discover and not only learn from, but act upon. (ST)

"I think it should be required to have a business minor to get an acting degree, because whether you like it or not you're going to be managing a very unique criteria for your taxes, accounting, marketing (yourself), and dealing with legal issues such as contracts on a major scale."

Steve Taft: You've worn a lot of hats in your career. Actress, voice-over artist, educator, consultant and producer, a Tony Award-winning producer at that. What was your journey? How does one go from college to where you are currently in your career?

Meredith Lucio: When I was a kid I'd always see myself as an actor. And I was the one that got my friends together, like second grade. I'd get the kids from the neighborhood and it was like, "OK, we're going to have a show on Tuesday night at my parent's house, we'll rehearse today and tomorrow and this is what we're going to do. So, I would essentially produce these little fifteen, twenty-minute shows and I'd conscript my little brother and sister and all the parents would come over and we'd do that. I was also the person in fifth grade (I still have the script), that wrote this play, directed, played in it and we performed it. And then when I got into junior high and high school I felt I was just an actor and in college I really just focused on acting. I did

take some directing classes after I left [Texas] Tech and I'm probably a better director than an actor, but I have more experience in acting. When I was at Tech I didn't want to be type-cast and administering and I think that can happen in high school and college, where if you're willing to do those jobs and you're good at it, people will sacrifice you on the stage because that's so much more competitive and put you into these other technical roles. I was probably pretty good at some of them, but I didn't necessarily have a yen for that. And that was also why back in junior high I only acted because that was the only creative choice available to me in a story-telling world and I think that happens at a lot of schools. I know teachers today are trying to have kids be more in command of their art, but at the time, the teacher directed it, the teacher produced it and the only thing you could really do was build a set (and I certainly didn't have an affinity to do that), or act. So, that innate talent to produce got lost a little bit. Same thing in high school. In high school, one of my good friends was an enormously talented singer and never got cast because I think our teacher relied on her for the backstage stuff or the stage management stuff and although she didn't pursue a theatrical career, she has one of the more gifted voices I've ever heard, naturally gifted, untrained voices. She never got her shot because we relied on the edict of our teacher to say these are the stories we're telling, these are who gets to tell them and I'm directing them all.

So, by the time I got to college it never would have occurred to me to do it myself. I tell people when I do workshops, "Only so many people can get cast and not everyone gets to be Hamlet or Reno Sweeny or whoever. If you don't like the roles you're getting or you don't like the stories you're telling, tell your own stories." Find a room, do what you can for fifty bucks instead of five-thousand or fifty-thousand and fail if you must. That big idea that you want to do? Do it. What matters is that you do it and learn from it and evolve as a story-teller. So, after college I sort of traipsed around and got some work and then decided to move here to New York to pursue my yen in theatre. So, I started to audition (I wasn't Equity, never got my Equity card), and I always struggled with the fact that you couldn't audition unless you had your Equity card, but you couldn't get an Equity card unless you had an Equity gig. And the only way to get a job was to audition. I know people who were puppets at Six Flags for six months so they could get their Equity card and I always felt like that was working the system a little bit.

ST: And some students take the Children's Theatre tour in order to get their card and at times that can come back to bite them because once they have their Equity card they can only do Equity gigs.

ML: That's right. I always found it odd that people who make the decision about whether you get the Equity job or not are the producers and not all producers have an affinity for the craft of acting or story-telling. I always thought it was interesting that Actor's Equity had no control regarding the craft and who becomes a representative of the actor's union.

So, anyway I came here and did a couple of shows Off-Off Broadway and told one bad story too many. And my struggle as an actor is that you have no control over the story you're telling, you just have to get the job. You don't know if the story is good or bad when you're trying to get the job. You get a "side" maybe, or a blurb of what it is and that really frustrated me to a degree. If I'm going to work for little or no money or sacrifice things like not having a mortgage or a big bank account, I'm at least going to tell stories I want to tell. And that is where or how my idea of

perhaps getting into producing came into play. And the only way to decide what stories to tell is to produce. You can write a story, but you have no control whether it sees the light of day if you're the playwright. The only person that controls that is the producer.

ST: What propelled you to become a producer?

ML: Some friends of mine had pointed me to the Commercial Theatre Institute which is run by the Broadway League. And the Commercial Theatre Institute is focused on educating people on what it is to be a Broadway producer and investor. So, I went into this three-day workshop and I felt I'd been given the keys to the kingdom. I mean you had the guy who at the time was the lead producer of *Jersey Boys*, you had Kevin McCollum, I mean right in front of me in a small theatre talking about what it was to produce *Rent* and how he chooses a story to tell. You had G.M.'s (General Managers) telling you the insides of budgets. I remember being sort of shocked that this was so accessible . . . the information. They were so willing to give us the inside scoop. And that sort of reawakened this producing yen for me and I then became a member of Theatre Producers unlimited which is meant to produce producers essentially, and I got some great mentors and started working on it and then eight years ago I did my first commercial producing gig which was an Off-Broadway show called *Rooms* and it sort of consumed me in a way. You come to realize that at this level that producing is an all-encompassing job, you have to have your fingers in so many pies. It's really hard to act and produce or direct and produce. It's not impossible, but it's complicated. Originally, I got into producing thinking I'd just produce my own stuff. But the enormity of the one job is so all-consuming I just got the yen for commercial producing and trying to get shows on Broadway.

ST: How often does a theatre producer influence the casting choices?

ML: The general rule of thumb is . . . and it's funny because I'm working on an option right now with the playwright who is also going to play the lead and working on the nuances of that . . . really the lead producers, the general partner producers, the writer and director all have an influence in casting decisions. The general rule is nobody can ever insist on any particular person, but everybody can have a veto, so it becomes a really interesting nuanced negotiation of finding what works and what doesn't. Sometimes it's really frustrating. I have a play I'm working on and I want to cast two A-list actresses. So, we're going down the list of actresses who may be interested and we think there was one really amazing A-list actress. And the playwright was "I don't like her for this. I don't want her. I'm going to no vote that." My frustration was that this is an unproduced playwright, he's never been produced. And I'm sitting here thinking, "Really? This woman who could make your name and would agree to do this play . . . and you don't . . ." Part of me respects that he feels that strongly about it, then it must be really important and part of me was like, "Really? The fact of her doing this show could make your next show being done . . . (*snapping her fingers*) like that." It takes time and energy. For me, there are actresses, celebrity actresses that are not on our list because I know I cannot listen to their voice for ninety to one-hundred minutes. I find I'm very sensitive to our own aural input and I cannot abide a weak or tinny voice, particularly from women. I just can't do it.

ST: Now, you won a Tony Award for the revival of *Porgy and Bess*. How did that opportunity arise?

ML: One of the shows I produced recently was the Bedlam Theatre production of *St. Joan* by George Bernard Shaw and Joan talks about hearing the voices and the Cathedral bells ringing and I think a lot about when you get an opportunity sometimes it's like a bell, you can't help but say "Yes". With *Porgy and Bess*, a few months before I got involved I was at a benefit and one of my colleagues said, "We're coming together on *Porgy and Bess*, do you want to become involved. It's a good deal." And I wasn't really feeling it so I passed. And then at the same time there was a little bit of controversy. It had started at ART (American Repertory Theater) with Artistic Director, Diane Paulus at the helm and it had gotten an amazing response in Boston and they were coming to Broadway and everything was going gangbusters. Then Stephen Sondheim who had a revival of *Follies* on Broadway that season wrote an editorial for the *NY Times* about how awful it was that they were reworking *Porgy and Bess* and that Audra McDonald dared to say that she had a better idea of what Bess was and could be or should be than the Gershwin's. Then all of sudden (I suspect) investors were more reticent (I don't know this for sure), but the sure thing of getting the capital, I wonder if people were a little bit more tepid and maybe invested less than they said they would, or decided not to invest because it was a big bold statement, not only on Audra but on Diane Paulus. How dare they add to this great work of the Gershwin'!

It was the Monday after Thanksgiving and I was in Houston. I had walked to the grocery store because I was making my grandmother enchiladas. I had decided to make her enchiladas, I didn't have a car, but there was a store just down the road. And I'm literally at the store amidst the Christmas trees in Houston and I get a call from the same guy who I had talked to at the benefit earlier and he was like, "You know we're still working on *Porgy and Bess* and it's a great deal and you can get above the title" (your name) for a raise that was pretty reasonable for me. And he was telling me the perks you would get for raising so much money and all of a sudden it was like that bell, I heard that bell and I was like, "This could work for me." I said, "Let me think on it a little bit and see what I can do." So, I went about my grocery experience, went home and made enchiladas and that's how I decided to do it. I decided to do it probably around November 30th or December 2nd or something and the show opened on January 12th (2012). So, I basically had six weeks, having never raised that much money before, having never raised money for a Broadway show before, I had six weeks to make my nut. [*A "nut" is the amount of money it takes to put on show every week.*] It was a lot for me and my name would be above the title which is instrumental whether you may get a Tony or not. The person who came in with the bulk of the money I raised I did not know, but it was in the process of raising that money that I met this person and they agreed to come on board. It was a harrowing six-weeks and it was hard and you get a hundred "no's" for one "yes". And you cast such a wide net to find the person who is eligible, because not everyone can invest in a Broadway show. There's something called an "accredited investor" (<https://www.investingbroadway.com/what-is-an-accredited-investor>). You find someone that wants to do it and can do it. I don't want to take advantage of anybody because it's a high-risk investment and you want to make sure you're not pushing someone into something they're not ready for. It's one thing for a show to succeed or fail and to understand that going into it. It's another thing to coerce people into doing something they really don't want to do.

ST: One of your personal qualities I appreciate is you are up front with people. You don't B.S. anyone.

ML: In a way I credit my actor training. Acting is not lying. Acting is really about telling the truth. Immersing yourself in a perspective and I really can't lie to someone. There are times I think I need to be more of an asshole (not really), because there are people that get people to agree to things that are not in their best interests.

ST: In the long run that's probably an advantage for you because people know they can trust you.

ML: Yes! I want to do it the right way. I want to earn it. I don't want to cheat the system. There's no reason to be that greedy.

ST: What attracts you to a play from a producer's perspective?

ML: I had a director one time ask, "What stories do you gravitate too?" And I had to really think about it. I like good storytelling. I tend to like characters that are authentically human and honest and diversely put together. Women in shows have to be authentic and interesting and transcend, especially now, all those societal "types" that are rampant in storytelling today (2017). This election has sort of changed me and my ability to give a pass to something, like women who are not written well, that doesn't mean they can't be troubled, but authenticity and being well-rounded and really not viewed through the lens of the typical male perspective. That said, one of the plays I'm now working on, four women – two ten-year old girls and two adult women that was written by a man. And what attracted me to the play was the way the two ten-year old girls are written is just exquisite and that they're not overwritten. And that's the magic that playwrights have. They are writing almost nothing, but on the page the space between the lines is so full of emotion and intent. So, I tend to like shows that have a sense of tribe to them, a sense of community.

ST: Producing is barely touched upon in college, probably because most professors aren't fully aware of what the position truly entails and students may not think it's a viable option.

ML: I think that producing *is* a viable option for theatre people. It would help our industry as a whole if people in theatre really understood what producing was and had that as an option for a career path. But even more so, actors, directors, writers, anybody in this business is essentially going to be their own business. I think it should be required to have a business minor to get an acting degree, because whether you like it or not you're going to be managing a very unique criteria for your taxes, accounting, marketing (yourself), dealing with legal issues such as contracts on a major scale, more so than the average person that gets a job at Apple for example.

I do a workshop with the message of: "Do your art like it's your business." You create a business plan for whatever show you want to do or your career perhaps. If the artist wants to create a specific project let's do a business plan for that project. You ask yourself all the questions that need to be answered to successfully make the project happen. Discovering the tools that will allow you to do what you want to do whether an actor, writer, director, etc., and the young aspiring artists needs to understand they are a microcosm of a corporation and it's more than just

the fun stuff. Nobody wants to pay attention to the dollars and cents, but it's a crucial part of your business, otherwise people will take advantage of you left and right. Understanding the contract and what needs to be in it is crucial. Understanding the importance of asking for a contract, even if you're friends. You need for it (the contract) to be ultra-clear because you don't want there to be any misunderstanding and that you know exactly what you're promising each other. And to my mind, it's more important that you have a contract between friends.

ST: I can't thank you enough for taking the time to share your time expertise with me. It's been great to catch up after all these years.
