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HISTORY MATTERS



M | HISTORY

History on Broadway

Olivia Evans speaks with producer Jennifer Friedland on her work on *Suffs*.

How did you get started in theatrical producing?

I grew up in West Bloomfield, attended U-M as an undergrad and for my law degree, and now live in New York. Here, I'm immersed with theater and very lucky that it's accessible to me. I wanted to learn how you tell stories on stage. There's something here called the Commercial Theater Institute, and they help train producers. There were a lot of people that were very generous with their time and sharing information, and then I dove into investing and raising money for shows that I felt had a lot of influence on me.

How has your History degree influenced the way you think about storytelling?

It's impacted me tremendously, especially in the stories I gravitate toward. One of the most important parts is that everybody's voice needs to be heard. Advocating for someone with your own lived experience and your own identity is not enough. There's a line in the show I'm working on now: "progress is possible, not guaranteed." Change is messy, but it's possible and it's worth fighting for what you think is right, and advocating for that.

I always keep in mind that famous quote: those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. If you don't even know this story, how can you expect to not make those mistakes?

Tell me more about *Suffs*.

I learned about *Suffs* in 2018 through my Commercial Theater Institute class—the title refers to suffragettes of the early twentieth century. It was on the heels of *Hamilton*, and one of

the lead producers of *Suffs*, Jill Furman, is actually one of the lead producers of *Hamilton*. There have been a lot of historical plays and musicals that I found so inspiring; *Hamilton* is one of them, also *Les Misérables* and *Floyd Collins*. Yet, women's history is traditionally relegated to an anecdote at the bottom of the page.

When my kids were 10 and 13, I came home after I learned about *Suffs* and asked them: Have you heard of Alice Paul? Have you heard of Ida B. Wells? They hadn't! That reinforced my desire to tell this story, because I don't know if it's still being taught in depth. To honor

those women who left their children and campaigned across the country, who were starved in jail for their beliefs—to honor them, you need to learn from that experience and build upon it. We have that responsibility.

It's wonderful to see both theatre and the study of history expanding in scope. When trying to tell stories of marginalized groups at earlier historical moments, it can be extra challenging because part of the erasure was the lack of maintaining primary sources. With storytelling, you are forced to be creative to fill in the blanks. It's been wonderful that there is a lot of literature and information on the suffrage movement; Shaina Taub did an incredible job using a lot of different resources. She worked with a lot of professors, went into archives, and dove into that history.



Jenn Colella as Carrie Chapman Catt and *Suffs* Broadway Company (Joan Marcus)

This type of theater—telling stories that educate and entertain—is why I want to do this. I saw *Suffs* through many iterations: from workshops to the full-blown Public Theater presentation in 2022. Two years later it was on Broadway.

I knew the show so well that I could watch people watching the show. It's so incredible to see people's reactions, especially young people. Many were motivated when they left, especially in the election year: to protest, to get involved, to reach out and be part of the community.



(Rob Desantos)

What work goes on behind the scenes for *Suffs* and your role as a producer?

Your role as a co-producer is once the show gets to a theater, you try to help with getting excitement up. You get access to different financial information: ticketing information, marketing information, advertising information. I think co-producing, in most shows, is more of a financial role in support in the show, but there were so many women interested in this show: a lot of women, a lot of first-time co-producers, because I think it really spoke to us. There's a hunger there for female-centered storytelling, especially on Broadway.

That's what's amazing about Broadway. Our theater had about a thousand seats, so eight performances a week is 8,000 people. You probably can't name the first movie you saw in a movie theater, [but] you can probably remember your first play or musical. It's an overwhelming sensory experience. The theater is one of the last places left where you gather as a community, and the last place where what you're seeing is real. That's another history lesson: how important theater has been for communicating stories. It's a beautiful medium.

When you were working on *Suffs* all those years, was there a kind of a personal message that resonated as you worked?

I think it's important to keep educating myself on different points of view, new information that has been discovered, and the responsibility to fill in the blind spots of what my education didn't teach me. I think it's really important, because I took a lot of European history, Chinese history, and art history, which I love!

The effort to teach history through a more inclusive prism is welcome progress in the field. While the show includes multiple perspectives, it does select Alice Paul as the main protagonist. How do you tell this story

in a sensitive way, while including all the different women that were involved at that time? We try to highlight, and at least bring an initial awareness to the fact that this was a multi-layered, multi-pronged approach to getting women the right to vote.

Congratulations on all the Tony nominations! What has having this show be successful in these ways mean for you?

Thank you! It's so satisfying and exciting, and I just have so much respect for Shaina Taub and the creatives, and how much work they put in to the show. Last year was such an intense period politically, and sadly it hasn't waned at all, but I think activism is important to Shaina and a lot of the cast. For them to be telling this story at night, and being activists during the day, I have mad respect for them.

What is your advice for History grads who want to work in similar fields?

Cast a wide net, and get exposed to as much international content and fields of study as you can. I think for people that want to get into this field, take advantage of what is available at the university, because it is like a mini universe in and of itself. So if you're interested in theater, take classes at the School of Music, Theater, and Dance, get involved in the Power Center, or participate in theater troupes or comedy troupes. You know, the campus has literally everything you could want, but you have to show initiative.

That's a good producing lesson too, because producing has to be done with passion and vision, and none of it happens without taking initiative. That's a good trait to have as a student and as a producer: seek out all that's available to you. ■

Suffs is now on a national tour and will be playing at the Fisher Theatre in Detroit from April 12–26.



Shaina Taub as Alice Paul in the *Suffs* Broadway Company (Joan Marcus)