

# The Washington Post

---

## The Rarest Role in Musicals? The Female Director



**By Peter Marks**

Updated: Wednesday, May 13, 2009

Marcia Milgrom Dodge has never been one of the usual suspects.

She's toiled for decades in the quasi-anonymous vineyards of regional theater, directing an "Anything Goes" here, choreographing a "South Pacific" there. The gigs have been pretty steady, and most of the time she's had a blast. But not until she got the out-of-the-blue call to come to Washington to direct and choreograph the Kennedy Center's centerpiece revival of "Ragtime" was she given a bona fide crack at a careermaker.

It's been a pretty heady several months for the garrulous 54-year-old director, who has not only scored a personal breakthrough -- the critically praised, \$4.4 million production is selling out the Eisenhower Theater and has sparked serious negotiations for a move to Broadway -- but also broken a barrier. She happens to be the first woman to direct a major musical produced by the Kennedy Center.

It might be surprising that in 2009, women are still having to grope their way to the power seat in an artistic field such as theater. And the helm of a musical, with its complex and expensive working parts, is perhaps the most difficult and challenging position the theater has to offer. Yet for all the successes of a Julie Taymor ("The Lion King") or a Susan Stroman ("The Producers"), women even today only occasionally receive the assignment to direct a big-budget, big-showcase musical.

Although the ranks of choreographers are chockablock with women, the lineup of female directors snaring the coveted top behind-the-scenes job is substantially thinner. Of the 15 musicals that opened on Broadway this season, for example, only two have been shepherded by women: Diane Paulus of "Hair" and Kristin Hanggi of "Rock of Ages." They join a fairly exclusive sorority of female directors with a show currently running on Broadway. Taymor, Phyllida Lloyd ("Mamma Mia!") and Francesca Zambello ("The Little Mermaid") are the others.

Dodge has been in the business long enough to have found some peace with her status. "I'm generally off the radar," she says with a laugh, as she sits at a back table of a Broadway watering hole, a few dozen blocks from the Upper West Side apartment she shares with her husband, Tony

Dodge, a writer, and their 11-year-old daughter, Natasha. It is a few days after "Ragtime's" opening, and she is back in Manhattan for the first time in a long while.

"But I'm really lucky. I work. I rarely call myself an artist, but I strive to achieve art. Even in summer stock, we were able to make a little art." She adds: "I would like, though, more opportunities for a bigger project."

Paulus, the newly installed head of the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., is making her Broadway debut with "Hair." "It's a huge pinch-me moment," she says. Both she and her acclaimed revival, first presented in Central Park by the Joseph Papp Public Theater and now at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre, are Tony-nominated.

The 42-year-old Paulus says she's hopeful that things are loosening up gender-wise: "Hair's" music director, production stage manager and choreographer, she notes, are also women. Yet parity does seem a ways off.

"Theater remains a pretty small club at the top of the pyramid," says Molly Smith, artistic director of Arena Stage, where she's directed several big musicals.

"So if you look on Broadway or in the commercial theater, you will find that women are still wildly underrepresented as playwrights, as producers. And if we look at musicals, they are the most male."

Smith, who's never directed on Broadway, thinks major directorial jobs go predominantly to men in part because of a prevailing mind-set about leadership. "When I direct a musical, it's more like being a general than it is when you work on a straight play," she says. "It's a more complicated piece of machinery. There is more risk, especially in a commercial production, so probably what happens is people manage that risk by going to experience."

The producers and institutional heads (mostly male) who do the hiring for such ventures say gender matters not a whit to them. "I could care less what their sex is, I want someone with a creative idea about a piece," says Michael Kaiser, the Kennedy Center's president, who brought Dodge aboard on the recommendation of "Ragtime's" creators, composer Stephen Flaherty, lyricist Lynn Ahrens and book writer Terrence McNally.

Still, Kaiser acknowledges that the pipeline is not primed for the success of female musical directors. "Women have played a dominant role in modern dance choreography, but less in direction, and I don't know if that's a cultural thing."

Kaiser, in fact, was not even vaguely aware of Marcia Milgrom Dodge when the name was broached. "I first thought of Mary Mapes Dodge, who wrote 'Hans Brinker,' " he says. Even the fact that Marcia Dodge's directorial work had once been seen at the center, in a 2002 revival of Andrew Lloyd Webber's one-woman chamber musical, "Tell Me on a Sunday" with Alice Ripley, hadn't struck a chord. (For that short engagement, an independent producer rented a theater at the Kennedy Center.)

As with such other directors as Stroman and Kathleen Marshall -- not to mention Bob Fosse or Michael Bennett -- Dodge's initial steps as the rehearsal-room pooh-bah were taken in tap shoes and ballet slippers. After she graduated from the University of Michigan, choreographic work eventually led to directing jobs. Her three-page résumé lists more than 90 productions for which she has served as director, choreographer or director-choreographer, everywhere from Arena to the Sacramento Music Circus.

It was one of those itinerant jobs, directing a revival of Ahrens and Flaherty's "Once on This Island" on the East End of Long Island, that forged the path to "Ragtime." The songwriters saw the production and liked it, and liked even more what Dodge did subsequently with a pared-down, child-friendly revival of their lamented Broadway flop, "Seussical."

"I was really impressed with her work," Flaherty says. "She had really stripped the production back to its essentials." (One of her inspirations was to set the overture in a schoolyard where the children became the Dr. Seuss characters.)

That ability to dig down and illuminate the bedrock strengths of their work made the songwriters think of her again, after the Kennedy Center approached with the offer to do "Ragtime." The 1998 Broadway original, based on the E.L. Doctorow novel, was lavish but cold.

"This is sort of a really big deal for Marcia being at the helm, and she totally rose to the occasion," Flaherty adds. "It's a very dense story and very dense score, and perhaps originally, there was so much information, visual and historical, that the story was difficult to digest." Dodge did away with elaborate sets and made the archetypal characters more flesh-and-blood.

Dodge, too, was aware of what a big deal this production could be for her, and yet she was able to keep that notion at arm's length. Though wildly methodical -- she developed a 30-page chart for design development -- she didn't even know what the show had cost until after opening night, when she came across the figure in this newspaper. It took her aback. Ultimately, however, the number itself did not mean that much.

"I know how to put up a show, I know how to get the best out of my actors," she says. "I try to create an atmosphere that's very safe and very creative."

Paulus also remained somewhat under the radar, despite her involvement in an eclectic array of critically lauded off-Broadway productions. "Running Man," an avant-garde musical she directed in 1999, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. And "The Donkey Show," a glitzy updating of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" set in a disco with actors lip-syncing to "I Love the Nightlife" and "Car Wash," had a long off-Broadway run and has since been produced around the world.

Oskar Eustis, the Public Theater's artistic director, remembers that when he first met Paulus, she was a "downtown theater gal with downtown street cred who was also interested in populist entertainment," as well as being "incredibly bright, interesting, full of ideas about shows."

Paulus certainly likes what the show is doing for her public profile -- "Yes, the phone has been ringing" -- and she's even prouder of the way she has been able to integrate the raising of her two daughters, 4 and 2, into the nursing of a hit.

"As my husband always points out," she says, "since having my children, my career has taken off."

Photo: By Helayne Seidman For The Washington Post

Next Article

**Send to a Friend**

**Arts & Living**

**Home**

**About Us**

**Contact Us**

**Help**

© 1996-2009 The Washington Post Company  
Powered by Crisp Wireless, Inc.