

BY LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES AND ALEXIS SOLOSKI

Feminism

ON BROADWAY

On Broadway, it has been a year of women: waitresses, shopgirls, concubines, Revolutionary sisters, a literary editor, a morphine addict and many victims of abuse. Is this cause for celebration or despair? Or pie?

The musical "Waitress" and the play "Eclipsed" featured all-female creative teams. Yet even as women constitute two-thirds of the Broadway audience, women still lag far behind men as playwrights, composers, directors and designers.

In a season hailed for racial and ethnic diversity, what about gender parity? The New York Times theater critics Laura Collins-Hughes and Alexis Soloski recently discussed the role of (and roles for) women this year, on Broadway and off. Here's an edited version of their conversation:

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ALEXIS SOLOSKI Let's get right to it. Has this been a good year for women?

LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES There's been progress, sure. But I wouldn't say that makes it a good year. It's interesting that this is the season when the producers of "Waitress" and "Eclipsed" have marketed their shows by touting the presence of women in key creative roles. If that weren't a rarity, it wouldn't be a marketing point.

SOLOSKI I think it's always helpful to see women in creative roles; the numbers in those fields are still pretty terrible. At the same time, many of these shows were telling the same kinds of stories about women, stories that sometimes needle me. I think we both had problems with "Waitress" on Broadway, right?

COLLINS-HUGHES Going there already, are we? Yeah, my head popped right off at the end of "Waitress," which in the hands of Sara Bareilles, Jessie Nelson and Diane Paulus has become tonally a very different creature than the much more nuanced Adrienne Shelly movie it's based on. One of the few interesting aspects of the central character here, a waitress named Jenna, played by Jessie Mueller, is that she is an unhappily married woman who gets pregnant and adamantly does not want the child. Yet — this will be a spoiler for anyone who hasn't seen it — the moment she gives birth, she is utterly transformed as a human being, which I found

Renee Elise Goldsberry, Phillipa Soo, and
Jasmine Cephas Jones in "Hamilton"
PHOTO by Joan Marcus

Leading Ladies

creepy & reactionary. But the show does have a pink and baby blue logo, so I should not have been surprised.

SOLOSKI That the show is popular with female audiences mystifies me. I don't read it as empowering. It condemns bullying behavior from Jenna's abusive husband and then rewards it from the nerdy suitor of another waitress and the crotchety diner owner who bankrolls Jenna's liberation. And the baby aspect of "Waitress" wouldn't have rankled so much if reunions with children — and here we go with the spoilers again — hadn't been the finale of two other female-centered Broadway shows, "Bright Star" and "The Color Purple."

COLLINS-HUGHES Those reunions didn't bother me, since they were part of restoring to those women the children they'd lost. For Celie and for Alice, the children's absence has been an ache that's followed them through life; it was never their choice to be separated from them. So the reunions are part of alleviating the suffering they've endured, largely at the hands of men. Speaking of which, that's also been a big theme this season — women who are abused and transcend that to triumph. Which is kind of disturbing as something that investors are willing to gamble on commercially.

SOLOSKI I don't know if it's more or less disturbing that in many cases, it's paying off! In the same way that I wouldn't mind stories that culminate in women reunited with children so much if there were similar narratives for men, I'm also bothered by the fact that women's struggles are about overcoming or confronting abusive men — "The Color Purple," "Waitress," "Bright Star," even "Blackbird" and "Eclipsed" in their way — whereas men get to struggle with politics and power and art and conflicts deep within the self. I'm thinking of "Hamilton," "A View From the Bridge," "The Crucible," "The Father," "Shuffle Along" and even "American Psycho." The women in these stories don't even have that much to do.

COLLINS-HUGHES That's true. Is that something that's always on your radar? It's

always on mine. The first time I saw "Hamilton," blown away as I was by it — I was disappointed that there was so much terrific stuff for so many men to do, and basically two substantial female characters who are crucial to the story but still pretty much on its margins.

SOLOSKI Yeah, I can and will go completely fangirl for "Hamilton," but that show is never passing the Bechdel test. The women are sensational, Renée Elise Goldsberry, as Angelica, his whip-smart sister-in-law, particularly, but the characters exist only to love, marry and seduce Hamilton. I'm glad that the script makes us aware of how brilliant Angelica is ("I've been reading Common Sense by Thomas/Paine./So men say that I'm intense or I'm insane") and how much Eliza, Hamilton's wife, achieves after his death, but there's no getting around how marginal they are. After they meet him, do they ever talk about anything else?

COLLINS-HUGHES I knew you were going to pull out that quote! I love that line. But I do think the Bechdel test argument is not the strongest when these two characters, Angelica and Eliza, are sisters whose relationship predates and outlasts their relationships with Hamilton. Each has the other's back, which matters, and it also matters that Angelica — who breaks my heart every time I listen to that cast album — has a relationship with Hamilton that's not just about sexual attraction. It's about intellectual companionship, too.

SOLOSKI I read recently that Lin-Manuel Miranda likes the idea of cross-casting some of the men's roles with women once the show is licensed to high schools and colleges. That's what I want to see all the time — not necessarily women in men's roles, but roles for women that are just as rich and complicated and brave and villainous and surprising and messed up

as those available to men. What was your take on "Eclipsed," Danai Gurira's play about female captives in the Liberian civil war?

COLLINS-HUGHES What I liked about "Eclipsed" was that it didn't prescribe one way of living for its characters. They all end up making different choices — one of them particularly worrisome — but the important thing is that they're in charge of determining the course of their own lives.

SOLOSKI And I really loved how strong and varied their relationships were with each other. What did you think of the relationships among the women in "Waitress" and "The Color Purple"?

COLLINS-HUGHES There's a lot of sisterhood in action, which is also the case in "Eclipsed" and, to a lesser but still striking degree, "Shuffle Along," in which Audra McDonald's character, a star named Lottie Gee, acts as a mentor to Adrienne Warren's young Florence Mills. Refreshingly, the women in these shows are mostly looking after one another rather than pitted against one another, competing for men. That said, I was bothered by how lightly "The Color Purple" treads in depicting the romance between Celie and Shug Avery.

SOLOSKI Yes, the lesbianism was handled so delicately it became more or less invisible. What shows were you enthusiastic about? I know we both adored "She Loves Me."

COLLINS-HUGHES What was your take on Jessica Lange in "Long Day's Journey Into Night"? That's a more traditional role for a

woman, but a huge and complex one, and, oh, it is so nice to see something really substantial for an actress at 67.

SOLOSKI Yes, maybe more traditional, but her emotional life is just as vivid as those of the men around her. I know it's a divisive performance, but I was very much taken with her, how cruel she could be and how tender: That last monologue broke my heart, just as it should. Michelle Williams in "Blackbird" also divided people.

COLLINS-HUGHES It feels to me like more producers are getting the message female artists have been sending: that it's not O.K. to exclude them and that they'll make as much noise as necessary to get doors opened to them. That issue was only amplified at last year's Tonys when the creators of "Fun Home," the wondrous Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori, got their book and score awards off-air. But I'd love to see greater daring by producers — and I'd like them to keep in mind that female theatergoers are a majority but not a monolith.

SOLOSKI This season, I've worried that we still need to approach female characters as victims to accept them as heroes. Next season, I'd like to see women suffer a little less and run the world a little more.



Left to right: "She Loves Me" PHOTO by Joan Marcus | "Eclipsed" PHOTO by Sara Krutich | "Waitress" PHOTO by Joan Marcus