

Susan Stroman

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“  
DON'T BE AFRAID  
TO ASK  
THE QUESTION.”

- SUSAN STROMAN, DIRECTOR/ CHOREOGRAPHER

Director and Choreographer Susan Stroman is one of the most celebrated individuals in the industry, and one of the most successful women in her field with five Tonys and a myriad of other awards and nominations to her name. Stroman started as a dancer, but as her career evolved, found her way to choreography, starting with a revival of Kander & Ebb's *Flora The Red Menace*. She would go on to lend her creative vision to productions of *Crazy for You*, *Showboat*, *Big*, *Contact*, *The Producers*, *Young Frankenstein*, *The Scottsboro Boys*, *Bullets Over Broadway*, and many more, in theaters on Broadway, in the West End and all over the world.

### **On how music can drive storytelling:**

At a very young age, I was inspired by watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' movies. It was a big deal when they came on television. I could see how, when Fred Astaire would dance, the orchestra completely supported his movement. I understood that at an early age, if Fred Astaire jumped in the air, so did the orchestra. Arranging the music for the dance is also a big part of what I do when I create a new piece. As I work with the composer and the dance arranger, the staging, choreography, and the music become one. Even the musical time signature tells a story. For example, in *Crazy for You*, during the number "Shall We Dance", if I want Bobby and Polly to be coy and shy with each other, we play the music in a soft-shoe rhythm. If I want them to fall in love, we play it in 3/4 time. If I want them to chase each other, we do it in a fast two. The manipulation of the time signature in a melody can help you tell the story and elicit emotion from the audience.

### **On knowing your collaborators' business:**

The more you know about the other designer's job and their art, the better off your own work is going to be. I can make the most fantastic dance step, but if the costume is not right, it won't matter. I can do the *most* fantastic dance step, but if it's not lit right, it won't matter. You all have to come together and collaborate to make everyone's work better.

### **On the changing landscape of Broadway:**

On Broadway, the audiences have changed. There are many more tourists, and I think producers are gearing towards more tourist shows, which is why you see so many revivals now. Financially, it's so costly to mount a show; producers would like to have a sure thing. Anyone would like to have a sure thing, but it's a little different now. People won't take chances like they used to. There are not enough chances taken on artists.

### **On taking notes:**

If you do get notes from producers, even if something is off-base or you don't totally agree with it, it certainly highlights that area to perhaps make you analyze your decision and possibly think of something else. If there's a moment that bothers somebody, even if you don't quite agree with them, it puts a little star around the area and that makes you ponder, "Oh, maybe I could try this instead." I don't mind at all hearing from people, but there is a way to do it—a diplomatic way and a respectful way. In the end, you just want the room to feel safe for the actors and the creators.

### **On learning from your flops:**

It's very sad when a show doesn't work. A show can be a financial flop, but that doesn't mean it wasn't an artistic success for you—that's how you have to think about these things. Each show I do is a stepping stone to the next show. When people refer to something as a flop, it doesn't really register with me. I do feel bad about flops financially, but artistically, there's always good work. There are always great images to be seen and always great performances to be witnessed. As Mel Brooks says, "You hope for the best and expect the worst." You have to hope that people love what you love. I haven't done anything that I feel that I didn't put my whole heart or soul into. Whether it takes to an audience is a different story. If we all knew what that formula was, we'd all be doing it. In the end, you just never know what's going to sell tickets.

**On getting yourself out there:**

The best advice I can give you is: don't be afraid to ask the question. The worst thing that can happen is somebody could say no, and then you go on. If you believe in your work and believe in your talent, get up there and ask some questions. Also, you have to start it up yourself. You can't wait for somebody to call you. You can't wait for the phone to ring. You have to go out and create it. If you really believe in your art, you have to go out and create it yourself.

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**- CHARLOTTE ST. MARTIN, PRESIDENT**

The Broadway League, Broadway’s trade association, is comprised of a wide variety of industry leaders, including Producers, Theater Owners, General Managers and more. Before her tenure as the President of the League, Charlotte St. Martin was one of the highest ranking women in the hospitality industry and spent three decades as an Executive with Loews Hotels before making the transition to the Broadway League in 2006. With her unique perspective on customer service and unmistakable Southern diplomacy, Charlotte unites the multitude of agendas held by League Members to reach the common goal of enacting positive change across our theatres.

**On the primary function of The Broadway League:**

The League was formed to provide labor negotiations for multi-employers, but we've done a lot more than that since. We brand Broadway, we work on audience development, like Kids Night on Broadway or Broadway Week. But to me, probably one of the most important things we do is we create a place where a disparate group of people, à la the farmers and the cow hands, or the producers and the theater owners, can get together, discuss differing points of view, and then come to some kind of consensus about what needs to be done. They can walk out our door, shake hands, and move on.

**On what she credits the “Broadway Boom” to:**

We weathered the 2007, '08, '09 recessions better than almost any other industry because we continue to diversify our audience. If you look at what's showing on Broadway, there is something for virtually every age group and every interest level. When I came to Broadway, there were three kinds of shows, and then Disney. There was the serious play, the comedic play, and the big musical, and then you had Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*. Today, there's stuff for teens and tweens and 20-somethings and 30-somethings. Yes, there are going to be big, popular musicals where everybody knows the brand, and when somebody doesn't know what to see, they'll go to see that. But once you have one great experience on Broadway, then you want to explore and go a little bit deeper. I think that's what's happening.

**On the characteristics of a great producer:**

I heard a saying, many, many years ago, about sales people. It was, “Nothing happens until somebody sells something,” and I really have adapted that for producers. Nothing happens until somebody produces something. And the producer is the jack of all trades. Some of them are more creative, some of them are more business-minded, but at the end of the day, the best producers are those who are actively involved in all of those things, whether they're personally making the decisions or finding the people who are good at making a decision in that given area. There are certainly some that are very wealthy who go and hire great executive producers, and we need those, but I know those that become successful over the long run have continued to develop that multi-talented and multi-interest component to their productions. Enthusiasm is one of the things that is very healthy for a producer. I have never met a producer who didn't believe that their show was going to be one of the five that recoups its investment.

**On the theater industry's biggest challenge:**

You get on an elevator; people don't even look at each other—they're so busy looking at their iPhones. One of the most important things the League can do is to continually work on audience development and audience engagement with our young people. We've got to get them interested before they think the only form of entertainment comes from something that you plug in and charge.

**What she wishes she could do:**

I'd wish to get all of the people that work on Broadway and for Broadway, and that would include our colleagues in the unions, into a room, and get them to understand what the obstacles are for helping Broadway do even better. If that happened, we would have different pricing on Broadway, we would have different union contracts, we would have more profit-sharing when something was a big hit, and we would have profit-taking at a lower level when it isn't a big hit. And I think everyone would do better if we could do that.