



The young woman wanted to raise some money for charity by putting on a show, and because she was in New York, she decided to stage it on Broadway. After all, it has the biggest theaters, and thus the potential to generate the most income. It didn't much matter that she was just off the bus from Kentucky, or that she was 17.

So began the Broadway career of Rachel Helson, who at 20 is now the youngest producer ever nominated for a Tony Award, for her work on *reasons to be pretty*, a nominee for best play.

She is one of several youngish impresarios shepherding the Neil LaBute play—Doug Nevin, Erica Lynn Schwartz, and Helson's producing partner, Heather Provost, are the others—but her age, moxie, leadership in organizing breast cancer benefits, and work on the musical [*title of show*] have earned her a reputation as someone to watch. And with the theater world facing the twin challenges of a steep recession and an aging audience, Helson could be arriving at just the right time. Unless, of course, she decides to put her energy elsewhere.

"I think we're going to lose her to acting," said Annette Niemtow, a mentor of Helson's who has produced *Frost/Nixon*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Kentucky Cycle* on Broadway. "She thinks we won't. But I think once she gets involved, acting will sweep her off her feet."

Helson, with a confidence born of youth and sugar-free Red Bull, maintains that she can do both. "I have developed the opinion from working over the past couple of years that really talented people do a lot of things, have their hand in different parts of the industry," she said recently, a few hours before she was to graduate from New York University. "I don't think of myself as a producer and actor; I think of myself as someone who produces and acts. I don't like to label it. For example, I have a book coming out on philanthropy. I'm a writer, but I don't want to do one single thing my entire life."

Old Pro

Truth is, she was a veteran producer by the time she arrived in New York from Louisville. When Helson was 15, an aunt was diagnosed with breast cancer—the fourth of her parents' siblings to contract the disease. Leaning on her theater background, she decided to stage a benefit production of *The Rocky Horror Show*, whose film version has a large cult following in the city. She raised \$12,000 for the Komen Foundation, which bills itself as the largest grassroots organization of breast cancer survivors and activists in the world. The following year she raised \$25,000.

"When something like that happens to my family, I want to protect them," she said. "And that was my way of doing that."

Helson comes from a certain means. Her father is the president of a food-processing company and her mother is its executive vice president, and their contacts helped, at least in the beginning. But it was Helson's idea to produce a breast cancer benefit in New York, and she did all the legwork, which has involved a lot of wheedling, cajoling, and, at times, begging—all necessary skills for a producer.

For the benefit at Broadway's American Airlines Theatre, she had two actors drop out of the role of the narrator. Eventually she got Neil Patrick Harris to take it on. She finished with \$35,000 in ticket sales, and The New York Times reported that she raised an additional \$33,000 in corporate sponsorship. All told, she has earned more than \$100,000 for the Komen Foundation.

"I come from a family of movers and shakers; my mother in particular is a very positive person," Helson said. "Even if you think there's no way, she'll find a way to make something work. I really take inspiration from my parents."

Before the benefit, in April 2007, a story about Helson's exploits ran in The New York Times. It caught the attention of Niemtzw, who is involved with the T. Fellowship, a program designed to nurture the next generation of creative theater producers. (Orin Wolf, who just produced *Groundswell* Off-Broadway to positive reviews, received the first fellowship.) Niemtzw contacted Helson, and the two had lunch.

From the beginning "it was clear that she was a peer," said Niemtzw. "There was no sense that she needed mentoring. She needs more information, but the fact is that she understands why she's doing what she's doing and why it's important."

At Play

Niemtzw wasn't the only influential person in the theater world who saw the Times article. Kevin Spacey, artistic director of London's Old Vic Theatre, read it as well and asked Helson to become part of Old Vic/New Voices, a program for 40 theater professionals of promise. Though the American version of the program lost its funding, Spacey urged the group to stay together and form a company, and they have: At Play Productions.

The company has done a series of 24-hour play fests, in which a play is written, rehearsed, and staged in one day, and in the fall it will present its first full-length production, *Holiday Girl*. Helson said she cherishes her time with the group because she isn't its producer; all she has to worry about is acting. Given her range of interests and goals, if Helson had to pick a role model, it would be Philip Seymour Hoffman. "I think he has the perfect career as an actor," she said. "He gets to do the films that he wants to do and he runs his own theater company in New York City. He balances everything, and I'm kind of in awe of that."

As for her own acting, Helson plans to move to Los Angeles in July and become bicoastal. She said her biggest challenge is to bring her classical training to bear on more-contemporary work: "I come from the Stella Adler studio, which focuses intently on Shakespeare, Chekhov, Molière, and Ibsen, which is great, but you don't get to do those things a lot, unless you're in a rep company. I would need to focus on working with contemporary language. I'm never cast in Mamet things or LaBute things."

The New Frontier

In the 1980-81 Broadway season, patrons 50 and older composed 20 percent of the audience, according to the Broadway League. In 2007-08, the latest season for which statistics are available, that age group made up 37.5 percent. Audience members aged 24 and younger represented 19 percent of the audience in '80-'81 and 24 percent in '07-'08. But it's the middle group that may cause trouble for Broadway. Three decades ago, theatergoers aged 25–49 made up more than 60 percent of the audience; now they're less than 40 percent. If that demographic continues to shrink, will enough of them go to shows in their older years, when they typically have more time and money?

Helson said that maintaining its relevance in the face of an aging fan base should be one of Broadway's key objectives. To do that, she argued, producers need to expand their view of marketing. They can't rely solely on the old formula of positive notices, a display ad in the Sunday Times, and word of mouth. Nor can they depend on star and stunt casting. A multiplatform effort in new media is required.

For *reasons to be pretty*, Helson developed a text-messaging system for student rush tickets. "Text messaging is going to be the new frontier for Broadway," she said. "I'm sitting in class and I have to choose between two shows. One I have to go to the box office, the other I can use my BlackBerry. I'm going to do what's easier."

Also on the new-media front, associate producer Adam Cunningham is developing webisodes written and performed by people such as Steven Weber, Susan Blackwell ([*title of show*]), and cast members from *Reno 911!*. Helson and Cunningham have talked at length about how Broadway needs to be marketed more like Hollywood, she said. "We both feel that we need to bring hip, edgy things back to Broadway. It needs to be the thing to do."

It's that type of thinking that has endeared Helson to Jerry Frankel, who, with partner Jeffrey Richards, has produced six shows on Broadway this season. "She always has something to add and something interesting to say," he said. "I'm not saying everything she says is pearls, but a lot of it is something to use or think about."

But *reasons to be pretty* demonstrates the problem producers face in finding a widespread hit or a show that appeals to younger audiences. As the story of a young man grappling with a disintegrating relationship and a sense of displacement in the world, it would seem a sure thing for that group. But despite positive reviews and three Tony nominations, the play has struggled to fill more than 40 percent of the Lyceum's seats in any given week.

Helson thinks the marketing moves are beginning to take hold and will turn things around soon, but she concedes that no one has yet invented a foolproof formula for success. "We don't have stars in our cast; we have four actors," she said. "How to take that and translate it into ticket sales is the big question right now: How do you find a hit on Broadway?"

That's a problem that producers have always faced, and Niemtzw hopes Helson will get a lot of help in trying to solve it for her generation. "That's the point, after all," she said. "It's not simply to set up Rachel as an untouchable role model, but rather to have many more Rachels."

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