

50 cents • Vol. 1, No. 20 • Published by Anton Community Newspapers • October 2 - 8, 2013

LONG ISLAND WEEKLY

The cast of *The Scottsboro Boys*
caught mid-performance



Theater Special!

Catherine Schreiber & The Scottsboro Boys

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Let's Hear It For The Boys

Catherine Schreiber's trip from Great Neck to Alabama

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Arguably the best theatrical productions are ones that challenge the audience to think while simulta-



Schreiber

neously serving as a vehicle for entertainment, at least for a couple of hours. You wouldn't think that one of America's uglier chapters in race relations would not only capture a wide audience, but reap accolades, awards and be wildly successful. But such was the case with *The Scottsboro Boys*, a musical based on the trial of the same name where nine teenage black boys were falsely accused of rape in 1931 Alabama.

Great Neck native Catherine Schreiber is the producer behind this Tony Award-nominated production that's gone from Broadway to across the pond and is set to open at London's Young Vic. (The musical wound up getting extended an extra month despite opening night still being in the middle of October.) It's a story she came across as a script before going to see it off Broadway. The horror of the rampant racism, anti-Semitism and injustice inherent in this true life story prompted Schreiber to become involved with the show.

"I want to do important things that make a difference, open and change people's minds," she explained. "With *The Scottsboro Boys*, people are learning about history because of this show. Out of the other shows I've done, this is the one that affects me the most profoundly and along with constantly having people who just saw it come up to me and say it changed their lives."

This incident had such an impact on the native Long Islander that she eventually became involved with the Scottsboro Boys museum down in Alabama. After contacting archive founder Sheila Washington, the two eventually became friends and Schreiber wound up donating money and lending her name in support of its opening. The Broadway exec even went to a special event commemorating the trial's 80th anniversary earlier this year.



"[Sheila] invited me down for this ceremony to give the keynote address before a bill was passed to exonerate the last eight of the nine Scottsboro Boys," she recalled. "Governor Bentley signed [this pardon] and that's even more amazing given the fact that the KKK made threats back in 2004 when Sheila had a marker laid down in town to commemorate the Scottsboro Boys."

With a book by David Thompson, music by the great John Kander and lyrics by his late, legendary partner Fred Ebb, the impact of the show was such that its record 12 Tony nominations were only surpassed by *The Book of Mormon's* 14 that same year. The latter also shut out *Boys* and while the critical huzzahs for it were impressive, Schreiber felt a bit short-changed by the award.

"The music is incredible — we were nominated for 12 Tonys and were up against *Book of Mormon*," she explained. "*The Scottsboro Boys* is a better musical but *Book of Mormon* got all the hoopla at the Tonys. And [*The Scottsboro Boys*] should have won."

But rather than wallow, the model-thin producer/writer/actress has instead rallied and moved forward thanks to her combination of optimistic idealism, passion for her craft and an indefatigable drive. It's

these assorted attributes that not only have her getting involved in a number of other high profile productions including *The King's Speech* and *Peter and the Starcatchers*, (the prequel to *Peter Pan*), but led to a Tony win for *Clybourne Park*. She even took a jaunt down to South America the last few months as part of her involvement with *El Chico de Oz*, a Spanish language interpretation of the Peter Allen jukebox musical, *The Boy from Oz*.

That kind of ambition can oftentimes be traced back to early beginnings. When you ask Schreiber about her Great Neck roots, she perks up and is quick to point out that while she grew up in Great Neck North, her 90-year-old mother calls Great Neck Estates home while her sister and brother-in-law live by Schenk Avenue. But for the Tony Award-winning producer, it was the public school system that proved a solid foundation for her latter-day success.

"I had a great childhood in Great Neck North. I loved being a student. I was a star in all these plays. I was in *The Happiest Millionaire* in sixth grade and I did *Hay Fever*," she recalled. "Great Neck was a great place to grow up. I remember Ray, who was our acting teacher, went down to the most amazing costume houses. I wore the most gorgeous costumes.

They had these great facilities that many private schools don't have. The Great Neck Public School system was fabulous. I got a great education and I was very, very lucky."

If it seems like Catherine Schreiber is a throwback to the days when kids would put on a show in the backyard, you wouldn't be too far off. Chalk it up to an innate desire to understand all facets of whatever shows that she winds up producing which may have to do with her having cut her teeth as a working actress (who has appeared in episodes of *Seinfeld* and *Arliss*) and a playwright who penned the play *Desperate Writers* with creative partner Joshua Grenrock. It's wearing these multiple hats and getting everyone associated with whatever endeavors Schreiber is involved with that's kept her going and carried over into all of her work.

"I truly believe that the best producers are people that have done other things," she said with a smile. "I think it's so important to make everyone feel like they're all part of the family because you're all working together toward the same end. So I try to give that love to my people and in terms of my investors, I feel a tremendous amount of responsibility to people so I want to include them. I want [my projects] to be joyous and for everyone to have a good time."



Top and bottom: Catherine Schreiber and the cast of *The Scottsboro Boys*.