

Broadway Bodies cover image: dancer Ann Rethinking in a scene from the Broadway production of the musical A Chorus Line, 1980. Photo by Martha Swope © New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

SOPHIE BRESS · BOOKSHELF INTERVIEWS · ♡ 2

Rethinking the Broadway Body

A Conversation with Author and Scholar Ryan Donovan

Broadway *Bodies* is dedicated to “anyone who has ever been told they were too fat, too short, too gay, too disabled, and otherwise too much or not enough to be in a musical.” The book, written by musical theater scholar Ryan Donovan, examines the ways different aspects of identity have historically affected casting on the Great White Way, using shows like *A Chorus Line*, *Dreamgirls*, and *La Cage aux Folles* as case studies to illustrate the issues that arise when bodies are used as an artistic medium.

According to Donovan, *Broadway Bodies* was inspired by observations and experiences from his own performing career. Stemming from these lived realities, Donovan’s research for *Broadway Bodies* began as his Theatre and Performance PhD dissertation at The Graduate Center, City University of New York.

“As a short male dancer I was often discouraged from attending auditions because choreographers wanted dancers who were 5’11” or taller,” Donovan says, adding, “In grad school I was trying to figure out, ‘Where do I fit? What can I research that really is going to excite me every day and motivate me to keep going?’ And it turns out that I had the experiences all along within me that I could look back on with an academic lens.”

Broadway Bodies was released on February 17 and is Donovan’s first book. His second, titled *Queer Approaches to Musical Theatre*, will be published this summer. *Fjord Review* caught up with Donovan to talk about the influences of the ballet body on Broadway, mental health in the performing arts, and the ways audiences are underestimated.



Broadway Bodies author Ryan Donovan. Photograph by Lamour Foto

Towards the beginning of the book, you outline the transition to hiring “triple threat” performers, as opposed to the separate dancing and singing roles of the past. Do you think that the adoption of dance as a non-negotiable skill in casting also caused dance aesthetics to permeate Broadway?

We can draw pretty much a straight line from the development of the so-called “ballet body” in the 1930s and ’40s, in particular, right through to the Broadway body. George Balanchine was choreographing for Broadway in the ’20s and ’30s and then went on to the School of American Ballet and the New York

City Ballet. Some of Broadway’s biggest dancing stars studied [at SAB], like Chita Rivera and Charlotte D’Amboise. The ballet body also brought with it better training and a higher level of technique than Broadway dance was used to. At the same time, we have other choreographers like Agnes de Mille, who was working in ballet and modern dance and on Broadway.

There are all of these different influences that, over the course of the 40s and 50s, point the way towards the triple threat performer—*West Side Story* is probably the most famous early example of that shift. It became a norm by the 1970s, as a result of economics—the fact that producers could hire one person who could sing, dance and act and understudy the leading roles, and it saved them money. Instead of having to hire 14 dancers and 14 singers, they often would hire 10 dancer-singer-actors. So, I think that the ballet body profoundly influenced what we see on Broadway.

In both concert dance and on Broadway, there is a history of critics and press commenting on performer’s bodies. You draw on a lot of these instances in your book, often using them as examples to illustrate your theses. What would you urge members of the press to consider before making comments of this nature?

Part of the reason that I quote extensively from reviews is to show two things: how much language changes, and to reveal to contemporary readers what the norms were. Looking back at reviews from the 1980s that now seem enormously fat phobic shows us that that was normal then to write so grossly, so meanly, about body size in the mainstream media. I often tell people that my book is less of a how-to than it is a how-not-to. There’s always this element of criticism that is going to be subjective, and it’s hard for artists to receive criticism in the press because it often can feel like it’s personal or like it’s eternal—like it’s going to live on the internet forever. I think the bottom line is just don’t be cruel. Ask yourself: Does this need to be said? Does this need to be said in the review? And does it need to be said right now? And what do I hope the reader will get out of this if I am going to mention something that could be received as disparaging or unkind? I don’t think that critics need to sugarcoat, but I also don’t think that shame should be a part of their arsenal.





In *Broadway Bodies*, you recall a time when a friend, after seeing several Broadway shows, reached out to you to say “God forbid there even be a token chubby or fat person that looks like me.” Oftentimes, I think casting decisions are swayed heavily by anticipating audience reactions—but judging by this story, it seems like audiences might be being underestimated.

Producers consistently underestimate the audience. Audiences today are coming into the theater with the expectation that it’s going to be inclusive and reflect the world offstage. In that sense, I think we’re starting to see the norms of casting change. It’s an exciting time because of that—and because audiences are coming in now with this expectation. The most important thing that audiences can do, and the power that they do have, is to show up for shows that are inclusively cast and that reflect the real world outside of the theater. My friend went to see those musicals and just kind of felt excluded a bit because she goes to Broadway shows pretty regularly and never sees fat women as leads. Everyone deserves to see themselves—or someone that looks like them—in all of the parts in the musical.

***Broadway Bodies* extensively deals with size, sexuality, ability, and race. In the introduction, you note that you won’t be diving into mental health, though it seems like you might have some thoughts.**

There’s a generational shift happening in the workforce, including for Broadway, where mental health is increasingly an important aspect that is discussed openly. On Broadway, one of the leads in *Frozen* actually spoke about this when she took some performances off to focus on her mental health. I think that we’re seeing less stigma attached to discussing mental health, which is a huge positive for performers. Being a performer, whether you’re a dancer, an actor, a concert musician, or a pop star, is incredibly stressful—you’re dealing with constant rejection and you’re vulnerable. It’s so important for there to be resources for performers that they can afford, [so they can] take care of their mental health and prioritize it.

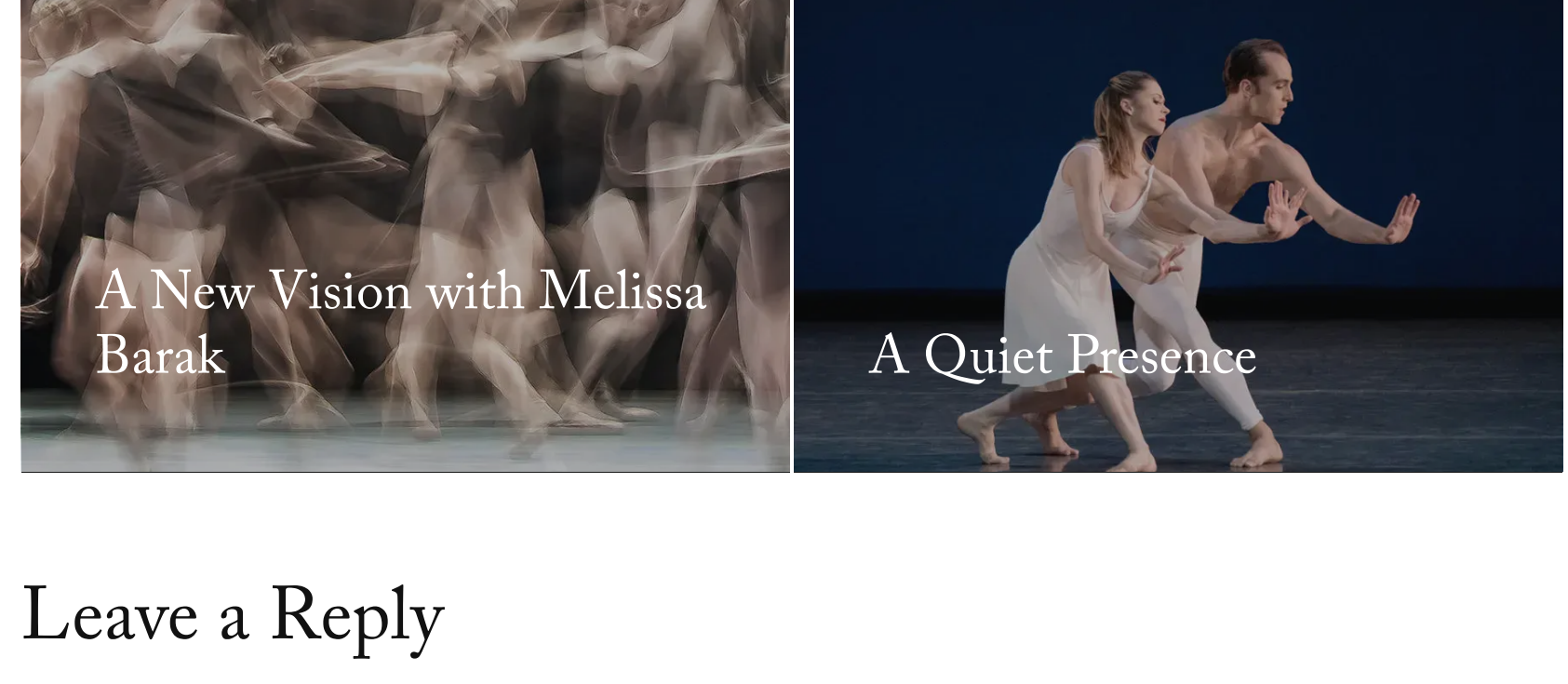
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Sophie Bress is an arts and culture journalist based in Salt Lake City, Utah. In her writing, she focuses on placing the arts within our cultural conversations and recognizing art makers as essential elements of our societal framework. Sophie holds a Master’s degree from the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism. She has been published in *Dance Magazine*, *L.A. Dance Chronicle*, *The Argonaut*, *Festival Advisor*, and more.

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