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## **Excerpt from Interview with Randy Ellen Lutterman, Director of SpringboardNYC**

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You know, school is a very different animal. There is no sense of how to live by yourself as an artist when you're not working or someone's not calling you into rehearsal or a class. There is no sense of what an audition room in New York is and how it's different from a rehearsal room in college.

There is a difference, if nothing else, in the timing of life once you are out of school—in the way that you have to be a self-starter, in the way that you have to set goals. On some level you have to work on yourself as your own best product, which is certainly not the way you're thinking about it when you're coming out of an undergraduate community. For me the program is a success if a Springboard student starts to think of themselves as having an active role to play in defining who they will be as an artist.

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# INTERVIEW WITH RANDY ELLEN LUTTERMAN FROM SPRINGBOARDNYC

## **What is SpringboardNYC?**

SpringboardNYC is a two-week college-to-career transition program that takes place each June in New York City. Designed for serious students looking to take the plunge into the New York theatre world, SpringboardNYC prepares the next generation of theatre artists for working life in New York. Taught by industry professionals, sessions include audition training with directors and casting directors, and seminars with industry's leading agents and managers, as well as intimate conversations with working actors. Participants have the opportunity to work on-their-feet, training in sessions designed to help them find jobs in the New York theatre community, and introduce them to living in New York. SpringboardNYC also gives hands-on practical guidance on how to survive in New York while pursuing a theatre career. I like to think it is the ideal transitional program, giving emerging artists information and contacts that would otherwise take them years to cobble together on their own.

## **How did SpringboardNYC come to be?**

One of my jobs as Executive Director of Musical Theatre Works was to create and develop programs that would help the emerging young artist in NYC. The theatre was devoted to commissioning and supporting writers of new musical theatre, but in fulfilling that mission we were in contact with new artists of every kind: actors, budding choreographers, beginning directors, dramaturgs, book writers, composers and lyricists. For each project, we worked to provide opportunities for new creative artists to work alongside seasoned professionals. In this way, we thought we would broker new relationships as we created on-the-job learning opportunities in our arts community.

As a result, as we would cast our



readings, we tried to see all sorts of new actors. We had a lot of work to do, and wanted to meet as many new people out there as we could to help make new work happen. After a time, we realized we were seeing hundreds of emerging young artists who were desperate for their five minutes in the audition room, who wanted to work, who had skills,

but for all intents and purposes had fallen out of the sky after college or university into the middle of New York and didn't have a sense of what to do next. SpringboardNYC came to be as a result of seeing a gap between what kids seemed to be learning in college or a conservatory setting and what the theatre world would ultimately expect from them. We started talking – producers, writers, directors, choreographers, dramaturges – about what was happening in the room. Why weren't these kids able to be the best version of themselves in the five minutes they had in the room with us? One by one, we started talking about all the things that we wished we had when we came out of school and thought surely someone should be able to help make that transition easier. The answer to those questions ultimately evolved into the SpringboardNYC program.

Currently in its eighth year and now a program of the American Theatre Wing, SpringboardNYC continues to teach young actors how to make the choices that will prepare them for a life in the theatre even if they decide to stop acting.

## **As well as the intensive theatrical component of the program you also help young people “deal” with life in New York. What are the particular challenges here?**

Well, we try to address the work on many levels. We want our kids to understand that who you are in the room and what you bring to the room will define the kind of work you get to do.

The point of the program is to help them peel away all of the other stuff to get to who they are as an artist. Someone will come in to audition and all you're getting is the full-on anxiety of life in New York: "Where am I living?", "My roommate's check bounced," and "Why is the tap water brown?" The big message of Springboard is, be clear about what you're trying to do. Certain things will make that more possible, and certain things will impede your progress. You can't control everything in the business, but here are the 10 things that you can control.

Some of it has to do with the uniqueness of the size and pace and expense of New York City. We work with our students to give them the resources they need to help find their first apartments, their first money jobs, even their first theatre internships and jobs. But mostly we give them the tools to begin asking and answering the right questions – so that they start working faster, and better, once they get here.

***What journey or transition would you hope young people make while with you for those two weeks?***

As Director of the SpringboardNYC program, my goal is to help students be the best version of themselves they can possibly be as an artist. This is a particularly challenging thing to do as an emerging artist in an audition situation when so many other elements are being brought to bear. I am looking for a student to understand the vocabulary and complexion of the business once they leave us. And for that same student to understand the differences between the work they may be doing at school, and what is now expected from them as a working member of this creative business community.

You know, school is a very different animal. There is no sense of how to live by yourself as an artist when you're not working or someone's not calling you into rehearsal or a class. There is no sense of what an audition room in New York is and how it's different from a rehearsal room in college. For some of us who were undergraduate theatre majors, we could work for six weeks on a piece and have two performances. In a real-world audition, you need to know that in three minutes you have to have a grasp of the material, you have to make clear choices, and it helps to have some understanding of what the people across the table are looking for. There is a difference, if nothing else, in the timing of life once you are out of school—in the way that you have to be a self-starter, in the way that you have to set goals. On some level you have to work on yourself as your own best product, which is certainly not the way you're thinking about it when you're coming out of an

undergraduate community. For me the program is a success if a Springboard student starts to think of themselves as having an active role to play in defining who they will be as an artist. And frankly, for some students this means the realization that they are not meant to be a performer. And I think that's great, too. If, as a part of learning about the many wonderful working parts of this creative business, you come to see that there may be a different role for you to play, I say terrific. Good for you! Make a different choice. But whatever choice you make, make it from a place of understanding the expectations and your options.

***Obviously there are theatre communities in cities all over the world, what do you think are the unique features of the New York theatre scene?***

Certainly every city has a different vibe when it comes to theatre. I come from Montreal where the bilingual theatre scene brings with it some amazing opportunities as well as distinct challenges. New York's theatre scene is amazing in another way. Much like London I suppose, it is truly the center of the work being done around the country. At some point, if you want to do this work at a certain professional level you will likely find your way to New York City.

What is most inspiring to me about the New York theatre community (and I think what is most surprising to my students) is that New York while seemingly big and scary, is actually quite available in many ways. I think New York in every way values excellence, and as a result the theatre community, while large and varied, is also always looking for the next wonderful talented thing. And that means truly talented people are always needed, and embraced. I also think once you step inside it even a little bit, that the New York theatre community is not that mysterious. And that because of the size of the place, there is room for all kinds of different work to be done. At Springboard we spend a lot of time listening to the narrative of our mentors' stories – not just because it's inspiring, but because it's completely and totally varied. You can make several choices, as long as they're clear, and the community is going to say, "What do you have to give us? We're interested in what you have to offer." New York loves talent and isn't afraid of it. If you can do many things well, all the better.

***You have had a varied pathway to date, can you provide us with an overview of your theatrical journey from leaving school?***

Whew! How much time d'you have? All kidding aside, I can give you a version of the pathway from graduating from Brown University to date. But as I tell my

students, the narrative changes as you begin to retroactively understand the choices you made over time. That's the beauty of a long life in the theatre – you get to reinvent yourself, and to a certain extent your story, as time goes by.

I am a Canadian who went to the United States for university. I graduated from Brown with a double degree in Theatre Arts and Comparative Literature. I moved to Toronto to pursue theatre, and did theatre, film and television. I had the good fortune of being cast as a series regular for television where I got to participate in some story consulting. Through that experience I began to write for television, all the while continuing to act, and also to coach actors. When a few years later I won my Green Card in a lottery(!), I picked up and moved to New York City. I began to work and audition as an actor, but continued to write and then to produce. I kept on producing and writing and coaching, initially as a way to support my life as an actor, but at a certain point some of that work became more compelling to me. When I was offered the opportunity to produce British comic Eddie Izzard's first American show in NYC, I jumped at it. From that point on, producing opportunities became very interesting to me.

I joined Musical Theatre Works as a consultant and then came on full time as Executive Director because they were launching a very ambitious Resident Writers program and I wanted to be a part of making new work happen. It had never been my goal to run a theatre, or to work in the non-profit sector, but I was excited by those challenges as well. Through the process of working at MTW, I launched a series of educational initiatives to help train new artists and SpringboardNYC was one of those efforts. And then bringing SpringboardNYC to the American Theatre Wing has made it possible to grow the program in many important ways. Throughout all of it I have continued to coach actors, through the Springboard program, and independently. And while I imagine my full-time life as a performer is over, I continue to work as a voiceover artist, and sometimes when the project and timing is right, as an actor.

The fact is I learned an important lesson somewhere along the way. New York is a city where many opportunities will present themselves, and the key for me was staying honest and open to what felt the most interesting, what would be the most creative, what would be the biggest new challenge. At some point I realized that it was my job to remain open as an artist and as I constantly tell my students, to "Choose the Next Best Adventure."

**How did the different professional roles present themselves to you – was it luck, being in the right place at the right time, or was it through a personal desire to shift focus over time?**

I definitely feel that this notion of one job/one profession was not the way for me. Because I was shaped by each experience I had professionally, who I was making the next artistic or business decision changed as well. I feel that our job as actors is to remain open to experiences and feelings, and also to keep ourselves current in whatever way is the most inspiring. So, as I tell our students at Springboard, it's your JOB to continue to learn after school is over. Waiting in a room for the phone to ring is both isolating and also makes for one dull actor with no life experience to draw on, and zero resources. I think the initial forays I made into other artistic fields – coaching, writing, even producing to a certain extent – were all simply ways for me to keep myself alert, intellectually challenged and engaged in the world, and of course to earn some rent money!

Some of the opportunities presented to me resulted from being in the right place at the right time. For example the two years of producing Eddie Izzard came after I shared my opinion of a show I had just seen in Toronto with an Australian who turned out to be a New York producer thinking of introducing Eddie to American audiences. That chance encounter led to the next three years of my producing, as I made a name for myself as someone who could help brand a performer, could raise money for a show, and who could shepherd a project from the stage to a video product for HBO.

And even when I had a desire to consciously shift focus, the stars were not always in alignment. I toyed briefly with making a “permanent” switch from producing theatre to television, but just as I was offered a new job in that exciting field we learned my father was dying of pancreatic cancer. I chose to stay a consultant to a theatre in lieu of taking on an 80 hour a week television gig so that I would be free to spend the remaining time with my dad. And ultimately, when the time was right, I joined that theatre as its full time Executive Director. I think things happen for a reason, and I have never regretted that decision.

I don't think the question should be “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I think the question should be “How do you want to grow up?!” As Ed Kleban might say, “It's in the *doing*.”

**You have acted and coached actors, been a writer, creative consultant, producer, project director, educator. Which role has given you the greatest amount of satisfaction?**

Each in its own way has been so very satisfying. I love a good story – building it, telling it, helping someone tell it, and finding a better way to share it. I think that while I have had a varied journey to date, what remains constant is my love of making something better, clearer, and more possible. So coaching an actor is so satisfying – you experience the immediacy of the work you are doing. Producing, creative consulting, or directing a project is also satisfying as you create the environment for success. Putting together a project, raising the money for art, helping a non-profit board of directors see and support a unified artistic vision – all of these things are incredibly satisfying to me. And teaching, helping to shape a new generation of artists, and finding ways to bring them closer to their best selves is perhaps the greatest feeling of all. Oh, and being a mom! Who knew? The best.



*Randy Ellen Lutterman is a Theatre Producer and Educator; and Director, American Theatre Wing's SpringboardNYC.*