



Britt Berke



Marcia Milgrom Dodge

OBSERVERSHIPS, THEN AND NOW

A CONVERSATION WITH MARCIA MILGROM DODGE + BRITT BERKE

Since the early 1980s, SDC Foundation has been placing early-career directors and choreographers as Observers on Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional productions. This program is the very heart of what SDC Foundation offers the field: a paid Observership to learn from the masters of a generation through door-opening opportunities. In celebration of SDC's 60th anniversary, the Foundation wanted to take an introspective look at the longevity of this program and what it's meant to our Members. In August 2019, we asked **Marcia Milgrom Dodge** to sit down with **Britt Berke** for a discussion of their respective experiences as SDCF Observers. Dodge is not only a 40-year SDC Member and former Executive Board Member of 12 years, but also one of SDCF's first Observers, on the 1981 Broadway production of *The Little Prince and the Aviator*. Berke worked as an Observer last season with **Lileana Blain-Cruz** on *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* at Signature Theatre in New York. Together, they share their memories of finally getting into the "room where it happens," what it means to be prudent in gaining a collaborator's trust, and the alternating pleasure and peril in a Post-it note.

MARCIA MILGROM DODGE | So, we've both been Observers.

BRITT BERKE | Yes, we have.

MARCIA | Tell me what you just did.

BRITT | I had the amazing opportunity to observe *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine*, by Lynn Nottage. **Lileana Blain-Cruz** was the director. We did it at Signature Theatre this past year, and it was exceptional. It was a fantastic room for me to be in as a pretty recent college graduate. It was my first Off-Broadway production that I ever worked on. And you were also an Observer?

MARCIA | I was!

BRITT | Tell me everything.

MARCIA | Quite a while ago, I was an Observer in the 1981/82 Broadway season, on a musical adaptation of *The Little Prince and the Aviator*. It was written by Hugh Wheeler, Don Black, and John Barry. The director that was my mentor was **Robert Kalfin**, and the choreographer was **Danya Krupska**, and they were both fired during the process. They were replaced by director **Jerry Adler** and choreographer

Billy Wilson. And I just remember somebody turning to me and saying, "Who are you?" I said—at that time, we were SSDC—I said, "I'm the SSDC Observer." They said, "What does that mean?" I said, "Well, I'm basically here to do whatever you need." They said, "Come with me." I remember going into the basement of the Alvin Theatre, which is now the Neil Simon Theatre, and putting the show on three-by-five cards, every scene on three-by-five cards, and Jerry and I kind of reshuffled the show. During previews, we would post running orders.

BRITT | Wow.

MARCIA | It was wild. I kept a journal, which I'm in the process of trying to locate in a big storage room on the Upper West Side. But it was an incredible experience. Anthony Rapp was the Little Prince. Michael York was the Aviator, Toni. Ellen Greene was the Rose; David Purdham and Janet Eilber were in it. Janet was a principal dancer of Martha Graham. So it was like a confluence—conflagration, more likely—of amazing artists, and it all went wrong and we never opened.

BRITT | You never opened?!

MARCIA | We closed before we opened.

BRITT | What was your reaction to that as an Observer on the process?

MARCIA | It didn't come as a surprise to me. Came as a surprise to me only in the money spent and they wouldn't get to the opening night...It just was impossible. Unforeseeable and insurmountable obstacles.

BRITT | What had your career been like up until the Observership? Was this a shock to you, working in the Broadway world?

MARCIA | Yes. This was 1981. I came to New York in '77, right after I graduated from Michigan. I started reading *Backstage* and looking for ads that said, "Choreographer, TBD." So anytime there was a show that had a choreographer TBD, I sent my résumé, because I was hot off being sort of a busy choreographer during my college years. In '81/'82, I don't think I had done any significant regional work. My regional career took off a few years later, in the mid-'80s. I walked into this Union and said, "I'd like to join the Union **Bob Fosse** founded!" It was a very different process back then. I literally took the elevator up to the 31st floor, 1501 [Broadway, SDC's former office location], walked in, said, "I just choreographed three shows in summer stock, I'd like to join the Union." They said, "Here, give us this money, and you're in." This is my 40th year as a Member.

BRITT | Congratulations!

MARCIA | Thank you.

BRITT | Was the Observership program in place then? Or was SDCF figuring out what it was?

MARCIA | I think they were figuring it out; I think I might have been the first Observer.

BRITT | How did you fit yourself into the space? Do you remember your first day of rehearsal?

MARCIA | Yeah, coffee. I did a lot of coffee. And hanging out with the ensemble when they weren't in the room. And I would sit in Danya's room a lot. Just to watch what the process was.

BRITT | Was that amazing, working with Danya?

MARCIA | It was interesting because it wasn't what you imagine as a traditional Broadway musical. I think *The Little Prince and the Aviator*, artistically, would be fascinating to reimagine now. She was doing almost an Asian-inspired, flying behavior with dancers. The dancers who flew...I remember this whole sort of ballet, where

the dancers were being lifted and floating in the air, and all of the guys that were doing the lifting were wearing blacks, which seems like a very Eastern methodology of staging. I didn't quite understand it in the story, the narrative of the story. I would flip-flop between Bob's [Robert Kalfin's] room and Danya's room. And then we actually made it to the theatre. And the next day, I came to work, and there was a new team.

Now my experience with Observers is as a Mentor; I like to get them in the room as soon as possible. As early as casting, if they're available, so that they can have the true experience—soup to nuts, as my mother would say—start to finish of the process of putting on a show.

Talk about your experience with *Fabulation*.

BRITT | On the first day of rehearsal, Lileana addressed the room and the entire Signature staff, everyone who was working on *Fabulation*. She thanked Signature Theatre for "letting her work with her heroes." And I was just standing there, thinking, "It's insane that she's saying this because that's how I feel right now."

MARCIA | That's how you feel.

BRITT | I felt like, "Thank you, SDCF and Signature Theatre, for letting me be in a room with Lileana Blain-Cruz and Lynn Nottage! This is impossible." It's kind of this overwhelming feeling. Lileana is just full of joy and life and jubilation. And she's incredibly intelligent. That was something that I really latched on to. As a young director, I had been struggling with how to balance being enthusiastic and being vulnerable with being respected and hardworking and bringing the work back to a really sincere place. And Lileana just knows how to do that.

MARCIA | Did your relationship begin on the first day of rehearsal?

BRITT | She had an assistant director, Nia Witherspoon, who's brilliant, and is also a Playwright-in-Residence and lecturer [at UMass]. So half the week she would be teaching and half the week she would be at rehearsal. It kind of became, if she wasn't there, I would take on her assistant director responsibilities, which was really amazing.

MARCIA | Which included?

BRITT | Which included a vast range of things, but ended up building into taking tech and acting notes for Lileana, which I would then type up and email to her before they were distributed to the actors.

MARCIA | Did she change the way the note was written?

BRITT | Sometimes. That became my favorite part of the process.

MARCIA | That was a big learning curve for you?

BRITT | Huge.

MARCIA | On how to take the notes.

BRITT | Absolutely. I would write Lileana's notes in the way I thought was the most articulate and convenient. And then I would come in the next day and see what she had kept and what she had changed and handed to the actors. It was this fantastic crash course that I was really thankful for. And it started the exact same way that your experience did, where I would say, "I'll do anything!"

MARCIA | *Anything?*

BRITT | "What can I do? Can I get you a seltzer? Can I even get your lunch for you?" And everyone was very respectful. I have my notebook right here that has all my notes. I brought it with me. There's a Post-it note in here where Lileana wrote to me, "Please take notes of anything that's confusing to you, or you have questions about."

MARCIA | That happened on what day in the process?

BRITT | Day 14, of a six-week process.

MARCIA | Oh, my God. Six weeks?

BRITT | Six weeks, and then we went into previews.

MARCIA | I don't get six weeks anymore.

BRITT | I know!

MARCIA | How bold were you about giving your critical thoughts?

BRITT | I was intimidated at first. But we grew to a point where I could offer a thought and Lileana might say, "That's a really good note." And I didn't feel like she was just being polite. Because although she's a wonderful person, she's not going to say something just to make you feel like you did okay.

MARCIA | Right.

BRITT | I felt like I was learning quickly. And she gave me a lot of confidence to push harder. Did you also have that experience, where there was a defining moment?

MARCIA | I had no conversations with Robert Kalfin or Danya Krupska. Then, when Jerry and Billy came in...as I said, Jerry and I went

and put the show on three-by-five cards. He would check in with me about what I thought, and I thought the whole thing was insane. I basically just said whatever he needed to hear. I think in the process of developing a trust, I knew this was going to be over before it started. But your situation was very different, because you are now cultivating a relationship with the director who will be a mentor beyond the Observership. That, I think, is the most important thing that Observers should know: if they do it right, that first one is major, in terms of you gaining knowledge as a protégé and learning skills from a very particular person who has a very particular way of directing.

Beyond the stipend and the relationship, what else did you think you were going to get out of being an Observer? What were you hoping for?

BRITT | Understanding how to bring my personality and my disposition into the process while still doing really challenging, deep work. During table work, Lileana was so great about letting conversations wander. We would get into really heavy topics, because *Fabulation* is a comedy and it's also about class and race and what it means to be present in certain ways. And she would guide us into these really dense theoretical conversations. But then she was also able to say, "Oh, this line is so funny, you guys!" That was really special. She starts rehearsal with a dance circle, that's how she does the warm-up. She created this ideal environment where everyone is having a great time, but then it can immediately snap into "We're doing the work and we're respecting each other."

When I had my interview with Lileana for the Observership, I had researched so much of her work, and I was specifically interested in her attitude toward making art and her very warm rehearsal room energy. And I was so passionate about the theatre she had created and the things I knew about her style. So I was very vocal about that during our interview, about learning how to be a young director and a young female director, and learning how to navigate the power dynamics in a rehearsal process. I knew she knew how to do it, and I was really excited to learn that from her.

MARCIA | Right.

BRITT | Are there lessons you learned during your own Observership that now, while you're mentoring, you're thinking about or keeping in mind in how you're interacting with the Observers?

MARCIA | The biggest thing I learned—and it wasn't on this Observership, but it was when

I was an associate for somebody, more mid-career—was understanding what the word "prudent" meant. Do you know the definition of "prudent"?

BRITT | I want to hear *your* definition of the word "prudent."

MARCIA | My definition is "keep your mouth shut." Even if you think you know the answer. Unless someone asks you for the answer, don't share it. But the Webster's definition is "skill and good judgment in the use of resources or caution or circumspection as to danger or risk." When confronted by your mentor, you have to know the difference between being their cheerleader and questioning their choices. If you're not prudent, if you start questioning their choices early in the relationship, you're going to have a really messed-up time. If you're their cheerleader, and you're able to anticipate, and really take the temperature of the room and see how the room functions with that person in charge, and you start to understand the dynamics in place, then you will be given more responsibility.

BRITT | Absolutely. A friend recently asked me about the difference between directing and assistant directing. I find a lot of value in assisting, whether it's someone who wants a lot of help or someone who doesn't want any help, because either way, that's how you learn as a director. That's how you resource techniques. That's how you learn how you want to be and how you don't want to be and what directing can mean to different people. I was really curious about your process with that, because you've had this whole trajectory. In your experience, what are the main differences between a director and assistant director?

MARCIA | I would say the director is the one who's responsible for everything that happens in the room, good and bad. And the assistant is there to help the director, support the director, help them get to their results, with the most care and support. But I think that sometimes assistants are judging. I'm guilty of it, too. I see it when I'm interviewing somebody. I'm like, "We're not going to be a good fit," because I already can see that choices are going to be questioned. I can't have you in the room if you're going to constantly question my choices. It doesn't mean that my choices shouldn't be questioned. It just means this relationship isn't designed for that. I have questions from my designers, my actors, my producers; I get questions from a lot of different places. I want to make sure that my toolbox of being able to generate good choices and make a beautiful product are not being questioned by my inner circle.

BRITT | Right, absolutely.

MARCIA | And I do believe that shoving that seltzer just when she needs it is part of understanding the room and understanding what is going to make your director do their best work. So, on some level, it could be straight-up cheerleading; another level could be a little bit of being mum, and knowing when to say, "You know what, you might want to go to the bathroom now, because you're going to head into this meeting." So it may seem coarse or, I don't know, impolite. But we need our helpers to help us. And sometimes in the areas that we're not necessarily conscious of, because we're so focused on the text, or this particular scene we're wrestling with that day, or actors are having some kind of issue—there are so many things to be navigating. Or you get a Post-it that says, "Call your set designer ASAP." And you're like, "Oh, no, what's the matter? We put the doors on wrong, they're not going to open in, they're going to open out?!" Every minute, you're putting out a little fire. If the person that's there to keep you buoyed up is doing their job, you can do yours even better.

BRITT | Right, just keeping tabs on the little things.

MARCIA | Yeah, keeping tabs and really becoming a radar to everything.

BRITT | That's how I explained the Observership to people. Because it's funny—you start working in theatre, and people who don't work in theatre are like, "What are you doing for work?" "I'm Observing."

MARCIA | Yeah, it's an interesting word.

BRITT | Observing with a capital "O." It's a weird world to live in. I would explain to people, "I try to supplement whatever the director needs." If there's something in the room that can be done, I try to do it. That might mean scampering around the theatre to make sure that all the sight-lines are working. Or, for example, we were trying to get this one comedic line to land during tech, and I mentioned to Lileana in passing, "What if we tried having him really enunciate it?" And then the actor tried it, and it worked. And Lileana got on the God mic to say, "That was Britt, everyone. Just so you know, that was a Britt thing." And when my mom came to see the show, the actors came up to my mom and said, "That line was because of Britt." They were so generous and supportive.

MARCIA | You had permission from Lileana to offer the idea.

BRITT | Exactly.

MARCIA | It was prudent.



Britt Berke, Lileana Blain-Cruz + Nia Witherspoon at *Fabulation* opening night at Signature Theatre PHOTO Jennifer Broski



Marcia Milgrom Dodge, Anthony Dodge, Natasha Dodge + SDC Observer Josie Bray at opening night of *Raqtme* on Broadway, 2009 PHOTO Robert Petkoff

BRITT | It was prudent. Yes. Thank you!

MARCIA | I think the goal for me, in finding Observers, is finding potential assistants in people that you want to continue working with. And I think that happened for you, yeah?

BRITT | I hope so. I very much hope so. A few weeks after the Observership, Lileana emailed me about taking line notes for *Marys Seacole*. And of course I said, "I would love to."

MARCIA | Absolutely.

BRITT | "Thank you so much for thinking of me." It's just the small things, contributing to a really magnificent show in even a small way. I was honored that she even thought of me, even just to take her line notes. That is what it's about. I really believe in the power of mentorship, the value of finding people who you admire, who in turn will admire you and support you. I feel like a lot of my career—especially because I went to Barnard—has been about finding mentors in professors and in directors. And then letting that relationship inform what I do and how I interact with actors.

MARCIA | There's an art to that. So what's next?

BRITT | I'm about to work on a project with **JoAnne Akalaitis**.

MARCIA | Wow.

BRITT | That will be really exciting. I'm a production assistant or whatever anyone needs me to be.

MARCIA | Great. How did you get that?

BRITT | I had the extreme privilege of working on the **María Irene Fornés** marathon at the Public Theater last summer.

MARCIA | Beautiful.

BRITT | I was really fortunate and very honored. And JoAnne Akalaitis managed that entire marathon. I was very nervous.

MARCIA | She spotted you.

BRITT | Really, through a mentor, I connected with her again, and I told her, "It was such an honor to work with you last summer. This summer, I heard you're doing this project, it sounds exceptional. I'm really interested in what you're doing." But this is sort of a thing that I don't know if I would have done before—

MARCIA | —before the Observership.

BRITT | It gave me this confidence to say, "I will just be in the room and help you if you want." People actually really respond to that.

MARCIA | Absolutely.

BRITT | JoAnne already has an assistant director and a production manager. And they both called me to ask, "What are you doing on this production?" And I told them, "I don't know, you tell me."

MARCIA | "Whatever you need."

BRITT | Truly, whatever you need. And the Observership taught me how to do that.

MARCIA | It gave you confidence.

BRITT | It gave me confidence! And it gave me this perspective: theatre is really hard to make and people want your help. My mom always told me, "Always look for work." Even if you feel like you're being annoying and asking, "Can I help with this?" too much. People are always going to say, "Yes," pretty much. That's what's exciting.

MARCIA | Yeah. My dad was a salesman. He used to go, "TELL 'EM WHO YOU ARE!" I had a good kick in the pants that way.

BRITT | What's next for you? What's your next project?

MARCIA | I start rehearsals in about a week on a summer stock production of *Deathtrap* by Ira Levin. One of my favorite mysteries.

BRITT | That's exciting.

MARCIA | We're doing it up at the Cape Playhouse. And then I'm doing *Mary Poppins*, which is enormous! Well, this has been delightful.

BRITT | Thank you so much for everything.

MARCIA | I wish you so much success. It looks like you're on a great path. **SDC**

This interview was edited and condensed by Rebecca Hewett.