

THE
ECONOMIC
CLUB OF
CHICAGO

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The Club welcomed Broadway producer Jeffrey Seller on Monday, May 7 for the 90th Annual Dinner Meeting celebrated at the Hilton Chicago Hotel. The evening started with retiring board member Jack Hartman presenting the Nominating Committee's 2018-2019 slate of officers and directors of the Club, which members unanimously accepted. The program began with remarks from Mr. Seller – producer of *Hamilton*, *Rent* and *Avenue Q*, among many other shows– which detailed his career and the business of making musicals. Afterwards, Chair Mellody Hobson moderated a candid discussion that touched on topics including Mr. Seller's path to Broadway, his process of creation, and future projects.

The previous day, Mr. Seller and Lin-Manuel Miranda announced the opening of *Hamilton: The Exhibition*, a traveling museum that will open in Chicago on Northerly Island in November. It will serve as an immersive exploration of the American Revolution through the perspective of Alexander Hamilton. In Mr. Seller's eyes, Chicago is the ideal place to launch the museum.

“Chicago embodies the intersection of civic stewardship, cultural engagement and capitalism that define American exceptionalism,” he said. “The Herculean efforts of the business and civic leaders that architects who dreamed up and built the Chicago's World Fair in 1893 exemplified how a city can enrich the lives of citizens through entertainment, education and illumination. “

These kinds of strategic considerations are skills Mr. Seller honed over his 25-year storied career in theater. Given the role he plays in making artistic visions a reality, he emphasized two points. First, that commercial potential is impossible to predict, so he has only brought to stage art that he loves; and second, he is committed to expanding the demographics of Broadway.

“*Rent* started the trend by attracting younger people to Broadway,” he said. “And now with *Hamilton*, high school students describe the thrill of seeing American history played out by people who look and act a lot like them.”

This mission is a topic Chair Mellody Hobson broached during their discussion, asking Mr. Seller why the issue of diversity and expanding demographics is so important to him. He cited his own experience growing up gay in Detroit and the feeling of being an “outsider,” which was challenged when he first encountered *Rent*, a musical that includes a cast of individuals of various races and sexual orientations.

“When we were doing *Rent* off-Broadway, I realized standing in the back of the New York theater workshop that this show is who I am and these are my people,” he said. “I want an inclusive society in which all of us get to participate, all of us get to play.”

Ms. Hobson also asked Mr. Seller what allowed him to see the “jewels” that other individuals in the industry might not consider.

“Well here’s the truth,” he said. “I can’t see how they’re going to go over, but I can feel what they’re doing inside of me.”

He then told the story of his first musical and biggest risk, *Rent*, and the day he first heard the show’s creator Jonathon Larson perform. It was in a small performance space with brick wall in the back and a piano. Mr. Larson performed *Boho Days*, in which he sang about the doubts he had about various aspects in his own life.

“He’s asking those questions in a musical vernacular that’s making the hair on my arms stand up and it’s making me gush with tears because I’m thinking, ‘how is this guy who I’ve never seen before in my life, telling my story?’” he said.

The next day, Mr. Seller wrote Mr. Larson a letter telling him that he wanted to produce his musicals, which would eventually lead to the creation of *Rent* six years later. Similar to *Rent*, there were many doubts in the industry surrounding *Hamilton*, however with time, Mr. Seller knew it would be “a success like *Book of Mormon* or *Wicked*.”

However, he did not know how much the musical would come to mean to the national culture. As the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts Rocco Landesman told Mr. Seller, “*Hamilton* has become a national trust; everyone feels that they own it.”

“Mr. Landesman was right, *Hamilton* has very quickly become part of the fabric of our American culture, our American dialogue, with a diverse cast that looks like America today,” he said. “It is a story that can be possessed and embraced by all Americans, young and old, female and male, and people of all backgrounds and ethnicities.”

Given the significance of the show, Mr. Seller knew that as producer, he would have to go beyond promoting the show and maximizing profits. He, along with Lin-Manuel Miranda and director Thomas Kale, wanted to make the show accessible to those who could not afford Broadway ticket prices. In addition to the lottery system that allowed 46 people per night to see the show for \$10 – “Ham for Ham” – and the twice weekly performances Miranda would hold outside of the Richard Rodgers Theater in New York, the group settled on an idea that would become the Hamilton Education Initiative. The initial goal was to bring 20,000 New York City Title I students to see the show in 2016 to 2017 for \$10 each, while additionally engaging them in a two-month-long classroom curriculum that studies the American Revolution and asks students to create their own original songs, poems, dances or dramatic scenes inspired by primary sources.

The initiative expanded its pledges to bring *Hamilton* to 250,000 high schools students across the country between 2016 and 2020, and in Chicago, the show has already played for 19,850 public high school students.

“This program isn’t just about teaching students to be writers, performers or activists,” he said. “It’s teaching young people to engage as citizens.”

The night ended with Ms. Hobson offering a “lightening round” of questions, the last being “what do you hope for next?”

“I hope to walk into a little performance space with a brick wall and maybe just a piano and have that exact same feeling I felt when I saw Jonathan Larson do *Boho Days* in 1990,” he said. “That’s what I’m chasing.”