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OPINION

## A female director at Paramount Theatre earned a Jeff Award nomination. 'It's about time.'

By Denise Crosby  
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Amber Mak, who was recently nominated for a Jeff Award as best director of a musical, stands on the stage of the Paramount Theatre in Aurora with her young daughter. (Amber Mak / HANDOUT)

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Amber Mak was so NOT expecting a Jeff Award nod for best director of a musical.

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In fact, when her associate director Megan Farley called up early Tuesday morning, and the first words out of her mouth were “It’s about time!,” Mak asked her single colleague if she’d just gotten engaged.



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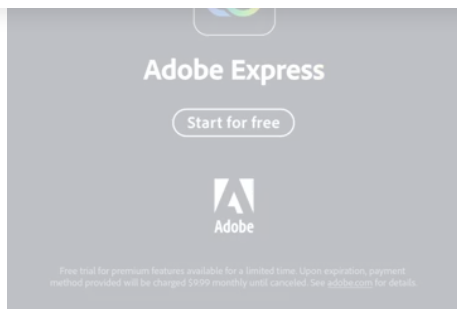
It’s just that “family friendly” productions are often bypassed because they are considered “more simplified, more light-hearted” and therefore, Mak noted, “not as complex of a story.”

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And then there's the fact women tend to get overlooked for these major behind-the-scenes roles, not to mention the accolades that often follow.

For as long as she can remember, Chicago theater critic Catey Sullivan, who had been a member of the Jeff committee for years, describes the awards themselves as a "snapshot" of the way women have "been underrepresented on stage and back stage."

Of the 2018 equity acting awards, she noted, only two out of dozens of nominations were given to women. And only about 12% of nominations in design categories went to women with this year's Jeff Awards.

"I haven't crunched the numbers," she said, "but I do know Amber is in a small, small minority. I would be surprised if more than 10 of the last 100 Jeffs for direction — equity or non — went to women."

Even the Jeff committee itself makes it tough for women to belong because historically, it has been "dominated by men who are white, male, retired, entitled," Sullivan added.

Many people thought Mak got snubbed in 2017 when she failed to be nominated as best director for "The Little Mermaid," especially when it was nominated in the best musical category, and earned the same number of nominations as this year's "The Wizard of Oz."

"She made that show work," even so much better than the Broadway production, "that I really thought Disney would steal her away from us," insisted Corti, who remains the sole honoree to have won Jeff Awards as an actor, choreographer and director.

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It's probably no surprise that "it's about time" is the same response this veteran showman gave me when I asked about going head-to-head with his younger female counterpart for the prestigious Chicago area theater award.

"She's a young director ... but I expected her to get recognition well before this," Corti said.

"Amber's work has been so imaginative, so well executed, so thought-out, so caring about the audience and to the story themes and values."

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Mak herself says she's always tried to stand "strong for women" by following in the footsteps of powerful and talented mentors, including the late, great Rachel Rockwell, who directed such Paramount productions as "Hair," "Music Man" and "Mary Poppins."



Amber Mak (Paramount Theatre / Handout)

"Rachel fought for the opportunity to be in the room and allowed me in with her," said Mak. "I got that experience. Without it, I would not get to do what I did."

It's not that men are consciously keeping women out of the room, she said, "but it comes down to who you know and who you work with." Even now, as director of new works development for the Aurora theater, Mak is the only female voice on the Paramount's leadership team. And President Tim Rater is determined to change that.

"We're trying very hard to give opportunities to women and want our creative team filled with diversity," he said. "Traditionally the makeup of theater has been male dominated. And that needs to change."

Sullivan says part of the reason for this inequity goes back to Shakespeare's England when women were forbidden from being on stage.

"When the play-writing field is so male-dominated, it's not surprising that great roles for women aren't as plentiful as those for men," she said. "If you ask any actress over 25 whether roles start to dry up as one ages, they'll respond with a resounding yes. And the historically male-dominant

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“I’ve seen men review shows by women that they ... completely misunderstood.”

Being a successful woman in her profession is also more difficult, Mak noted, because of the traditional “caregiver” roles women play outside the theater.

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“It’s freaking hard,” she admitted of those critical production weeks, where it’s not unusual to put in 12- to 16-hour days and still maintain a family life. Mak gave birth to daughter Teagan only weeks after “The Little Mermaid” wrapped, and “The Wizard of Oz” turned even more stressful because she found out the second week of rehearsals her mother was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer, which meant trips back to Kansas City.



Amber Mak, who recently was nominated for a Jeff Award as best director of a musical for “The Wizard of Oz,” demonstrates a few dance moves during a rehearsal for the production that ran last year at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora. (Paramount Theatre / HANDOUT)

“I was truly relying on my team, and am so grateful to my cast and crew,” she said. “We went down that yellow brick road together.”

Sullivan sees Mak as one of the few female singer/dancer/actors in Chicago who was able to parlay a career into director/choreographer. But the good news is that women buy most of the theater tickets and want to see themselves represented on stage. More female representation not only makes for a safer workplace - the theater does not exactly have a stellar reputation

when it comes to sexual harassment, the critic noted - it makes good economic sense.

Women are fighting hard to “reshape the system,” Sullivan pointed out, but the spotlight needs to remain on this issue for progress to continue.

“It is changing,” Mak agreed. “But not as fast as I’d like it to.”

[dcrosby@tribpub.com](mailto:dcrosby@tribpub.com)



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