

Forest Hills Seniors Share Broadway Memories

By Alex Christodoulides

03/20/2008

The senior citizens who attend Abby Jones's **Inside Broadway** class at the SelfHelp Austin Street Senior Center in Forest Hills are teaching their teacher every week, sharing memories of past musical theater performances.

In a basement classroom at the senior citizens center, located within the Forest Hills Jewish Center, 14 women and two men listened to Jones talk last Thursday morning about the words and music that have made "West Side Story" so well loved.

From a perch on top of a desk at the front of the room, Jones described the musical's connection to William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," the collaboration between Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim that produced the music and lyrics and the censorship that resulted in different lyrics for the recorded versions used in the stage production.

Aida Kruger, a senior who reluctantly read the role of the Shakespeare heroine, said afterward, "You asked me to read Juliet. If I had read Maria, I'd show you Maria!"

The nonprofit group Inside Broadway usually brings the spectacle of musical theater to children in elementary and middle school, but this year is essentially giving seniors in 18 senior centers in the five boroughs a trip down memory lane.

"I think what's attractive is many of the seniors grew up with Broadway," said Michael Presser, founder and executive director of Inside Broadway. "They know the musicals because they saw them the first time around, sometimes more than once, and own the cast recordings", Jones said.

And indeed, one of the students quizzed Jones on whether she was using the cast recording of "West Side Story" or the movie version. Jones explained to the class that censors in the 1960s changed some of the lyrics for the movie to make them less racy or insulting to Puerto Ricans.

Jones' students keep her on her toes, paying attention to current Broadway offerings.

"Sometimes they bring in reviews of current plays and want to discuss them. They'll say, 'I saw something about this 'In the Heights.' What's up with that?'" Jones said.

The four-week-old class discussed love songs for Valentine's Day, which was another learning experience, Jones said. The class was to choose from a list of songs the ones that fit their lives, she said. "One woman chose 'If I loved you' [from the 1945 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical "Carousel"] about an unrequited love," she said. "Who knew?"

The group frequently surprises her, and always makes her glad to come to Forest Hills, Jones said.

"A lot of programs are energy out, with dancing and singing. This group is energy in," she said.