



**Chatting with the Stars:  
Stephanie J. Block**

With a score by Dolly Parton, the new Broadway production of *9 to 5: The Musical* has been delighting audiences at Broadway's Marquis Theatre since it began previews this spring. Stephanie J. Block plays Judy Bernly, the downtrodden secretary originated in the similarly titled film by Jane Fonda. Block is no stranger to Broadway audiences or to theatregoers across North America. She created the role of Elphaba for the first national tour of *Wicked*, a role she recently reprised in New York. On Broadway she has also been seen in *The Boy from Oz* and *The Pirate Queen*.

The afternoon before *9 to 5: The Musical's* official opening night, she sat down in her dressing room with correspondents Ben Pesner and Sam Corbett to chat about her career and upcoming solo CD.

**Q: Talk a little bit about Dolly Parton as a Broadway composer.**

**Stephanie J. Block:** Dolly comes from the Tennessee mountains. That's what she's familiar with, but she's such a musician in every sense. If one were to say, "Write a song for this character," or "Write a song for this plotline," or "Write a song for this experience," she will do it quickly and beautifully. Or if one were to say, "These lyrics don't quite feel like they're moving the story along," or "This doesn't quite feel like the voice of the character," she will walk away, grab whatever's there--a napkin, a paper plate--and she'll just start writing. She'll be back 20 minutes later with three or four options, all of which would work.

When people see Dolly, they see hair and makeup and nails and sparkle. When the music starts, her head goes down, the wheels start turning, and she's a serious musician, businesswoman, and someone you want writing your music. Her sensibility for music really crosses all the boards. *9 to 5: The Musical* has huge glitzy numbers, a James Brown-type number, a bluesy number, of course, some country tunes and I get this exquisite song which I think is the epitome of musical theatre. It's called "Get Out and Stay Out."

**People are talking about “Get Out and Stay Out” because it’s a major show-stopper. How do you feel about performing this song that you’ll “own” forever?**

Thank you. It feels nice to hear you actually say that. It is such a beautifully written song. I’m very lucky; it’s a gift. I think people are used to me, Stephanie J. Block, belting right off at the top of the show, which is not this character at all. I’m so grateful that I get the opportunity to show something else with the humor and vulnerability.

The play starts with Judy Bernly’s first day of work. She’s timid, frazzled and scared. Her husband has just left her, and she doesn’t know where to go or what to do. The audience gets to see every step of this woman’s growth, from finding out what joy is again, to finding friendship, to finding some kind of purpose in her life. They see inch by inch her becoming more of a woman so that by the last half of the second act, I do get to sing, in full voice. Happily, the audience is with me. They’re cheering me on (me being Judy Bernly). They’re saying, “Good for you,” because she’s been so abused and mistreated, always taking it with a smile and continuing to give her heart. But eventually she says, “Enough is enough, I don’t need you anymore, I know who I am as a woman and get out of my life.” Luckily, the audience goes wild every night.

**The movie *Nine to Five* starred Dolly, Lily Tomlin, and Jane Fonda, whose character you’re playing. Jane Fonda also performed on Broadway this season, in a new play called *33 Variations*. What a fabulous coincidence!**

Isn’t that a blessing? Forty-six years [away from Broadway], and she’s literally a couple blocks up the road. She came to our opening night in Los Angeles. Dabney [Coleman] was there, Dolly was there, Lily was there, and Jane. It was a little nerve-wracking at first. These fabulous actors made the roles iconic, but we kept reminding ourselves that we were not playing these actors. We’re playing the characters of Judy Bernly, Violet Newstead, Doralee Rhodes, and Franklin Hart. When Jane Fonda came backstage after seeing that opening night, it was so important to me. For five minutes, we were connected. She looked at me, and she said, “You kept all the best bits and made the rest your own.” She seemed very pleased with the performance. What a relief! I went [to *33 Variations*] on opening night. Oh my stars, genius, just genius. Gorgeous! SO beautiful! She’s the real deal.

**You said that you weren't playing Jane Fonda, but you actually did play a real-life superstar, Liza Minnelli, in *The Boy from Oz* a few years ago.**

When I got the call [to play Liza] it was a Monday. That same afternoon I had to get on a plane to San Francisco to open the original out-of-town production of *Wicked*. I was sitting on the plane thinking, "This is going to be amazing. It's going to be my real Broadway debut, and... oh my God, what have I gotten myself into?" Panic set in. Liza is such a viable part of our community, and people adore her. *The Boy from Oz* previews was a juggling act. All departments were trying to find the right balance to create Liza on stage.

I can remember Liza saying in an interview that she stays away from singing her mother's songs because she doesn't want to be a second rate Judy, she wants to be a first rate Liza. I felt the same way. I was trying to give my interpretation of Liza: her energy, mannerisms and vocal quality, but the bottom line is that there is ONE Liza Minnelli and she does it magnificently! I was not going to pretend to "improve" upon that or exactly mimic that. She has got an essence, a spirit and an energy that no one can mimic and I respect that.

**You toured so extensively as "Elphaba" in *Wicked*. Do you have a story about the road that you'd like to share?**

That was a remarkable experience. [The producers] knew that they had to replace Idina Menzel on Broadway and they were also starting the first national tour. My agent and I talked about the pros and cons to doing one or the other. Following Idina on Broadway would have meant going into a show that has already been set. But, it was BROADWAY. Or, I could do the national tour. That sounded like the option for me. I wanted to start from the beginning, create with Joe Mantello [the director] and rehearse with a brand new cast. The experience was unbelievable. There was such great energy in every town. It was like a rock concert!

**You have a new CD out, and we hear you got Dolly Parton to sing backup on it. Explain that, please!**

The CD is titled *This Place I Know*. I didn't want to just record songs that were already out there or to simply re-interpret my favorite musical theatre tunes. My concept for the album was that if I ask a composer if I could use one of their songs, I also wanted them to perform on the CD with me. Each composer I asked said yes. At every session people would ask, "Are you singing something with Dolly?" I kept thinking that I admired and loved her so much and had built a really great friendship that I didn't want to cross the boundary of asking her for...anything more than she already had given me. People kept saying, "You're crazy, just go out on a limb and ask. See what she says!"

I spent hours composing the perfect email. The very next morning I received an email from Dolly saying, "Absolutely, of course, and the song I'd like to do with you, perhaps you've heard of it, it was the theme from *The Bodyguard*? I think our voices would be great on 'I Will Always Love You.'"

I couldn't have been more thrilled! I was a little nervous. Dolly encouraged Stephen Oremus and me to do a brand new arrangement. I wanted something really simple so that the listener would focus on the lyrics. I wanted it to stand on its own and not be compared to any pre-existing recordings. Thank God I found the guts to ask her. It's a beautiful track and I'm very excited.

*To learn more about the show, visit the 9 to 5: The Musical website at [www.9to5theMusical.com](http://www.9to5theMusical.com).*

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