

FROM THE BANKS TO Broadway

The Tony award winner got her first taste of performing while she was at Rutgers

By Lori Neuman RC'90

Communication, connection, and inspiration. That's what drives Aurelia Williams-Philpotts RC'97 GSE'98. It's also what she leaves you with from the moment you meet her – even if it is by phone. Her laughter is contagious, her energy is positive, and her warmth somehow carries through. It should come as no surprise that this Tony Award-winning singer and actress has developed a solid career in musical theater. And yet, for this self-described introvert, it is.

Asked about her career path, Aurelia speaks with enthusiasm and awe. After earning her master's degree from Rutgers Graduate School of Education, she turned her focus from teaching – which she says she will always be passionate about – to Broadway. Williams-Philpotts starred in shows such as “In Transit” and “Once on this Island,” for which she and her castmates received a 2018 Tony for “Best Revival of a Musical.” Here's what she had to say:

Is it true you didn't start singing until you were in college?

It's true! I did not grow up singing and was unsure what I wanted to do after college. My career was kind of a fluke. Dr. Leonard Bethel, a Rutgers professor of African American Theology who also happened to be the reverend at my family's church, referred me to a student group to sing at their upcoming formal. Soon after, I started singing on campus and joined a rap group. I also got the courage once to try Rutgers improv, which was pivotal for me and one of my most memorable experiences. It inspired my love of comedy, acting, and live performance. Until then, my interest was primarily singing – I wanted to be a recording artist.

You earned your master's degree from Rutgers Graduate School of Education, with plans to become a teacher. How did you make the leap to becoming a performer?

I was not expecting to make a career of performing, because I developed such a strong passion for teaching. I had even considered a full-time teaching position after graduation, at an elementary school in my hometown of Plainfield, NJ, where I had done my student teaching. But, the desire to be a singer was calling me. With the support of my family and friends, I pursued my dream,



knowing I had my teaching certification as a solid back-up. I started auditioning, one thing led to another and here I am. Whether it's musical theater or singing with talented musicians like Tomás Doncker and the True Groove All Stars, I give it my all.

With theaters closed due to COVID-19, how have you been adjusting, and what shifts has this meant for your career?

I've been doing more film and TV, and my living room has become a TV and recording studio. Theater is still happening but it's being developed in different ways. For instance, I'm currently working virtually to develop a musical adaptation of “The Scarlet Letter.” I really miss being in the room with everyone though, to harmonize and vibe with each other like we'd do in person. I thrive on the personal connection that comes from being in a room with your peers, and collaborating with other talented artists, writers, and directors. It's exciting to be part of the developmental or creative process, working together to achieve a common goal. I miss that. But I tell myself it's only for now.



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF AMBE J. WILLIAMS

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ABOUT AURELIA WILLIAMS-PHILPOTTS

Favorite Broadway show/musical? “Annie” was my first, but it’s difficult to say which is my favorite because there are so many. “Avenue Q” was great. It’s vital and brilliant.

Favorite movie? “The Color Purple” and “Harlem Nights”

Favorite song? Anything by Stevie Wonder

Acting or singing? Both – they are intertwined

Favorite hobby? Reading. I’m always reading.

Favorite book? “A Wrinkle in Time” by Madeline L’Engle



What does it feel like to be part of the Tony Award-winning cast for “Once on this Island?”

Winning a Tony was one of my most exciting and unbelievable moments. It was a collective effort and particularly meaningful for me. I was what’s known in the industry as a swing/standby which is an understudy for both principal and ensemble roles. This means I had to memorize a variety of roles and be ready at a moment’s notice to perform them. I had to learn so much, and because this show was staged to be on an island, this included dancing in sand – for 90 minutes! It’s really hard, especially if you think about the effort it takes to walk on the beach, much less dance on it. The fact that we won still blows my mind.

What do you like most about performing live?

I love connecting with people and providing a vehicle for people to connect with each other. I see it as a gift. As performers, we are telling stories about people you may fall in love with or not be able to stand; but for those moments, we are connected, and the arts provide an avenue to do so. But I find the entire creative journey to be the thrill ride.

Do you still get nervous before a show?

There is a misconception that most performers live for the applause, when many are shockingly shy and introverted as I was, growing up. I still get nervous and excited but at the end of the day, the arts are a place where people really see each other’s humanity – especially in times like now when things are so divisive.

You do a lot of volunteer projects that combine your love of education with your love of the arts. Tell me more about that.

Arts education is one of the most important experiences for students, and it’s important to bring art to those who may not be able to afford or experience it. We all need creative outlets and

someone to foster them, so I try to support these programs whenever I can. I am also regularly involved in an organization called Dream Wakers, which hosts classroom video chats offering students the opportunity to talk to people with non-traditional careers. It’s another way to connect with people who otherwise may not cross your path, and enables me to keep one foot in the educational arena. The connective tissue here is education. Even though I didn’t end up being a teacher, I will always be an educator.

How did your experience at Rutgers contribute to the person you are today?

I’m still very close to the friends I hung out with when I was in school. They are largely African American, so we naturally came together and stay connected to various issues and what happens on campus. I’m also part of a Facebook group of mostly male, African American Rutgers graduates. There are some alarming statistics on young African American men not succeeding in college, so these men made it their goal to help them succeed. On a completely separate note, I was also a resident advisor when I was at Rutgers, which prepared me well for things like public speaking and conflict management – both invaluable skills.

What advice do you have for others who may be looking at a new career path, or a non-traditional one?

A lot of people ask me how you get started in theater, as a singer. My answer is to just do it. There is no magical doorway to pass through. Find out what you need to do to reach your goal – whether it’s finding where the auditions are or who you need to connect with – and do it. If it doesn’t work out, tally up what you learned along the way and do something else. You can apply this to any opportunity.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY AT THE

EPICENTER NYC

How a weekly newsletter, founded by a Rutgers alumna, has been breaking down barriers through journalism in the wake of COVID-19 and social justice movements

By Kristin Baresich SAS’14

IF it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community to get through a pandemic. One need only look to Epicenter-NYC, a weekly newsletter co-founded and published by veteran journalist S. Mitra Kalita RC’98 SCILS’98, to see this concept in action.

Since its launch in July 2020, Epicenter-NYC has been focused on uplifting New Yorkers and serving as a touchpoint to give and get help in a variety of ways – from addressing food insecurity and PPE supplies to supporting local artists and businesses.

The name “Epicenter” reflects its roots in Kalita’s neighborhood of Jackson Heights, Queens, and the surrounding area – one of the hardest-hit regions in the early days of the pandemic. While Epicenter-NYC was created to serve this immediate neighborhood, its vision and reach go beyond city limits.

“I think about serving people through news and information as these concentric circles that expand outward,” said Kalita. “When we talk about local news, I don’t think of borders of a neighborhood as much as an individual and the many overlapping identities they embrace, and what they might want to know about. So while at our core, I do think our community is the epicenter, it also emanates outwards as an epicenter does.”

She cited some of her own identities as examples – a resident of not only Jackson Heights, but also Queens and New York City; a former resident of Puerto Rico; a daughter of Indian parents; a woman; a mother of two girls.

“Black and brown communities are a really important part of a mindset like this one because people come from all around the world to carve out a home here. It doesn’t mean they have given up on where home used to be,” said Kalita. “You can’t care about Epicenter without having some global view of the rest of the world.”

