

# A Performance-Driven Career Path

By **Kimberly Couzens**

**A**lia Jones-Harvey (MBA '03), has loved the arts since she was a child. Today, as an award-winning Broadway producer and a partner at Front Row Productions, she combines her passion for theater with her business acumen, working to bring classic plays featuring actors of color to Broadway. Her producing credits include the first African-American revival of Tennessee Williams's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" and "A Streetcar Named Desire" as well as "The Trip to Bountiful" and "Romeo and Juliet."

Jones-Harvey completed a dual-degree program as an undergraduate, receiving a mathematics degree from Spelman College and an industrial engineering degree from Georgia Tech. She worked at Procter & Gamble in IT, finance, and marketing before pursuing her MBA at Stern.

Jones-Harvey compares the seven years she has spent producing Broadway shows to running a series of start-up companies, which requires entrepreneurial skills. "We start with concepts, then secure properties, engage investors and talent, and enter into theater contracts," she explained. "With those elements in place, we build out the management team for each production." A typical day involves correspondence and meetings in any of



those areas to advance a project. Evenings are often spent in the theater interacting with the house management, crew, and company or attending fundraising events.

As a producer, she cites the skills she gained in finance and marketing as crucial to her current projects. Working on Broadway has "many similarities to my last job, marketing and financial reporting for hedge funds," said Jones-Harvey. "I court high-net-worth investors, provide education, and do financial reporting." Engaging investors is a key component of success in her role, as "Broadway is an alternative investment opportunity in which many high-net-worth investors

have not participated." She also cites the Arts Administration course taught by former adjunct Professor

Joseph Volpe, who was the long-term general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, as "a major inspiration" and Professor Al Lieberman's entertainment courses as "an excellent framework for the industry."

Although Jones-Harvey attended Broadway shows in New York as a child, she said she "did not see a path to working in the industry until a mentor and founder of Front Row Productions, Stephen C. Byrd, called with a proposition," asking if she would be interested in partnering with him to produce "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" with an all-black cast on Broadway. "I jumped at the chance!" she recalled. The

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Photo: Lisa Pacino

Left: Alia Jones-Harvey (MBA '03) and Stephen Byrd receive the Olivier Award. Right: Jones-Harvey produced a number of Broadway Productions including "A Streetcar Named Desire."

show's cast featured James Earl Jones, Phylicia Rashad, Terrence Howard, and Anika Noni Rose and was the highest-grossing play on Broadway in the spring of 2008. The West End production in London, which she co-produced, received the 2010 Laurence Olivier Award for Best Revival of a Play.

Jones-Harvey said: "Broadway in New York and the West End in London are considered the highest class theater in the world. On Broadway and the West End, the people that work in theater share amazing dedication to delivering the highest-quality productions for audiences to enjoy. The structure of operations and functions are very similar. Likewise, the cities are similar in their diversity and cosmopolitan theater-going audiences." For would-be Broadway producers and students interested in working in the entertainment industry, Jones-Harvey emphasized that "relationships are a key element of success in alternative industries and careers. Build and maintain as many relationships across functions as you can – you will need them!"

Byrd and Jones-Harvey are in development on several projects including a new musical for Broadway, "Black

Orpheus." Based on the original play by Vinícius de Moraes and the internationally acclaimed Academy Award-winning film, "Black Orpheus" is the enchanted re-telling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice set in romantic Rio de Janeiro during Carnival and featuring the music of bossa nova kings Vinícius de Moraes and Antonio Carlos Jobim.

Jones-Harvey is a supporter of several community organizations, including the National Urban Technology Center, New Worlds Theatre Project, and the Broadway League Speakers Bureau. She also teaches a course on producing for Broadway at The City College of New York and spoke at a leadership roundtable at Stern's Undergraduate College. "It is important for me to demystify the business that I am in for students looking at alternative career opportunities," she says. "Broadway is rewarding work that I look forward to every day, and I strive to encourage others to get into the business."

In her spare time, Jones-Harvey enjoys listening to music, running in Central Park, watching movies, and, of course, seeing plays. ■