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Renée Elise Goldsberry Talks About "Hamilton," "Girls5eva," and Her Ever-Evolving Concert

Transcript

Story by Madeline Orton

Maddie Orton (Voiceover):

I'm Maddie Orton and you're listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast.

Renée Elise Goldsberry is the Grammy and Tony-winning talent behind Angelica Schuyler in *Hamilton*. Her Broadway credits include Nala in *The Lion King* and Mimi in *Rent*, and her film and TV career includes (among many credits) *Ally McBeal*, *I, I*, my favorite episode of *Documentary Now!*, and currently, *Girls5eva* and *She-Hulk*. That is a long list of accomplishments.

Renée is headed to Mayo Performing Arts Center in Morristown on September 30th for her concert called *Opening Night: An Evening with Renée Elise Goldsberry*. I had the pleasure of talking with her about the upcoming show, creating an album, and the incredible lightning in a bottle that is *Hamilton*. Take a listen!

["A Little Wiggle" MUSIC]

Renée, thank you so much for your time. I'm a huge fan, and it's great to talk to you. I have a lot of questions about your incredible career, but let's start with the upcoming concert at Mayo Performing Arts Center in Morristown called *Opening Night: An Evening with Renée Elise Goldsberry*. I saw a review of your concert at An Appalachian Summer Festival, and they said that it focuses on unity and love, covering all genres, and felt like a church revival for the church of musical theater.

Renée Elise Goldsberry (REG): Oh my gosh. I need to steal that.

Maddie Orton (MO): That's lovely, right? Also, sign me up for a revival at the church of musical theater. That sounds so great. Do you feel like that—does that capture the idea behind your show?

REG: Absolutely. Better than I can, honestly. Yeah, it is absolutely a celebration of love, and it definitely feels like a party. There is a diversity in kinds of music, and that is where the unity piece comes in

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because I think we see—when we see similar themes in so many different styles of music, and then when we realize that we love so many different kinds of music, I think it reinforces the things that unite us, which I think is so important.

I started touring in 2017, and it feels also like the time where we started, you know, we started feeling increasingly separate from each other across state lines.

MO: Sure.

REG: And I thought that was just because of the 24-hour news cycle, and then COVID happened, and we really actually didn't travel outside of, you know, our homes, much less across state lines. And so I think it's been a unique experience with all that has been happening politically and socially in this country for the last couple years to be able to, you know, cross lines with one show.

We keep checking back in on the show, you know, as things keep changing. Whether we're in a health crisis or out of a health crisis, or you know—

MO: Yeah.

REG: —you know, socially distant or whether we're having civil unrest, you know, there's a war abroad, whatever's going on. We keep checking in and, and kicking the tires on this show, and keep discovering that it feels more and more important to do it. I love that. And it's been a beautiful thing.

MO: How has the show shifted over the course of time? You know, looking around, are there things that you've taken in or put out or things that feel especially relevant now?

REG: That's a good question. I think the things that feel especially relevant in a given performance have more to do with my personal life and what's just happened and, you know, like some—if you lose somebody. I have a lot of friends that have lost mothers this year and so there are some songs in the gospel segment that feel increasingly just poignant when you experience that. You know, my kids will do something that makes me laugh, so a song that I sing about them just has a perfect setup because of something they just said.

And you know, the rest is something that you just can't change. You're never going to not hear me sing the songs from the shows I've been in. Yeah, they would kill me, you know, if I tried to get out of the house without celebrating *The Lion King*, and *Hamilton* and *Rent*, and the shows that I've been in. But fortunately, all of that music is a celebration of the things that unite us. All of that music is a celebration of love. So it works. It works really beautifully.

MO: Yeah, that's true. That is a really interesting through-line between, particularly, those three shows. So when you create an evening like this, I mean, obviously there are those songs people are expecting,

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and probably freaking out if they don't hear, what other songs are you pulling that you want to include? Like, what is it about certain music that really excites you?

REG: Well, a lot of it is just about, you know, this wonderful instrumentation we have. We have just the greatest band, so they can play everything, you know. So it can become a rock concert, it can become a soul revival, it can become protest music, it can become all of the, you know, we, we have a jazz and a standard section. Everybody does it all so well, so we continue to kind of transform in front of you. The evening continues to change in that way.

And one of the things I love also is I have the most amazing three singers. I call them background singers because they actually sing background for my concert, but they sing in the forefront, everywhere else in their life. They just keep showing up for my gig. Thank God.

MO: Awesome.

REG: And, and it really just started because you can't--I can't really do some of that great music from *Rent* and *Hamilton* without some sisters on this stage with me.

MO: Sure.

REG: So it started there, but because they're there, and because of the virtuosity level of the band, we can play just anything. We can really burn. And so you can play Aretha, you can play Bob Dylan, you can play really everything, and it feels authentic and good.

So that's really kind of led the evolution of the show, and the other things just evolve when you just learn how to pace a show. That's something that you just figure out that that's kind of what evolves when you, when you learn, 'Oh, this doesn't feel good here. So let's, let's keep changing the song until we find the one that nails it.'

In this particular concert, the end of the show, the last 30 minutes of the show always killed, because it was--it's all the music that, you know, people know and love that I've been in, and it just, it, it works so well. And we found arrangements that work really well, which was a big challenge because most of the songs from the shows I've been in, are full ensemble songs.

MO: Oh, interest. Interesting.

REG: But, you know, they don't easily live outside of that world.

MO: Right.

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REG: And the whole reason I started concerting was because someone put together an arrangement of *Satisfied* that I love. And you know, you just don't want to... If you're not gonna do it well, then you don't do it, you know?

MO: Sure.

REG: Gotta do it because it's gonna feel satisfying. No pun intended. And when we cracked that nut with the songs, you know, when being able to pull a piece out of *Rent* that feels like you experienced *Rent*, then we were like, 'OK, we can do this.'

So we always had that last 30 minutes, and the question began, 'How do we work backward so that it feels this good from the top to the end?' And that's what we've done so far. That's what we finally figured out. And so it's fun to do. And the future evolution of the show will increasingly include original music. We don't do that as much.

MO: That's great.

REG: Yeah, we do. I've been working on an album for a number of years. It's so funny that I say that, 'cause it feels like a failure, like, a number of years, but we keep. Putting it off and bringing back on and, and, and I keep writing new music and I guess that's pretty normal for, people that just make albums.

MO: Yeah. I think that makes to also aren't, you're a, you're a mom. I'm a mom. I'm exhausted all the time. I don't know if anybody, but also, you know, I think of things like a strange loop, I think was a 20 year project, wasn't it?

REG: Oh yes, absolutely.

MO: So you know that doesn't, I, I feel like sometimes things need that time. That makes sense to me.

REG: And you don't wanna rush something that's this important. Um, but you know, uh, but you also wanna keep moving forward and not keep putting your pen down um, and you know, so that, that's a, that's a challenge, you know, we balance, that's what we learn.

MO: Sure.

REG: And, um, and I've had the opportunity to do some really wonderful things.

Um, you know, in, you know, other facets of my performing career, you know, I've, you know, done a couple of television shows I really, really love, a couple films I really, really love. So on top of just the joy of the time, you know, the heavy lifting with my family is the, is, you know, being on *Girls5eva*, you know, being on *She-Hulk*, doing all these other wonderful things, which also add to people showing up to my concert, so it's never a waste of time. And, and then actually, you know, and the life experience

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adds to the, you know, to the, to the music, to what you wanted to talk about and what you wanna create. So it's definitely, um, it's definitely been a good long time, but you know, I'm ready.

I, I feel very pregnant and very ready to share, um, with, with the people that, that are, are ready to hear it. And, and that's what I get to meet when I do this concerting. And every time I finish t concert, I'm, I'm not ready to say, and I'll be in the lobby signing my, I don't know, CDs. What do you say nowadays? I'll be in the lobby, you know, giving you digital codes to get Spotify, my music on Spotify. Exactly. I don't know. Um, so that's what I'm, that's what I would love to turn the, the, the big revival, the music that are revival, I'd like to turn all of them right. Into people on Spotify that are pulling my music out. And so I'm, I'm, I'm starting to play a little bit more of it in the show.

MO: I love that. That is so exciting. And you've been to several cities at this point. How has the reaction been, has anybody come to you and said anything that was especially, um, poignant or surprising?

REG: Every single time. Every single time, you know, if I have an opportunity to meet people after the show, which I'll do meet and greet sometimes um, but you know, anytime somebody finds me in like trying to slip away in a car, you know, um, I'm always just tremendously blessed, um, at the fact that we actually were able to accomplish, you know, the goal, which, which is really to, to remind us all of who we are and what we love, you know? And, um, even, you know, the further outside of, of COVID we get, you know, the, you know, we, we, we're no longer like pinching ourselves that we get to sit next to each other anymore, thank God. But, but still we need to, we still need to remember how good it feels to be in a room, listening to live music and singing along together. It's just, there's just nothing greater than that. And we, and we just need to celebrate it. So, yeah, I, my, my mission is to do something bigger than, um, a concert where people think, 'oh, she sings great and I love that song.'

MO: Sure.

REG: Um, my, yeah, my mission I'm clearly *Hamilton* doesn't need me to sell tickets so, um, you know, the, the question has always been, 'why, why are you doing this?' And, um, the answer really is, is, you know, it's, it feels more like a ministry and, um,

MO: oh, I love that.

REG: Yeah. I think I stole that from Leslie Odom Jr. I'll, I'll, I'll give him credit.

Um, but you know, it does, it feels like a ministry. And, um, and so when, when people have an emotional reaction and they chase you down to let you know, it feels like, ugh, yes. That was why I was here and I never, I never don't get it. Some, someone somewhere always finds me and lets me know that we were there for a reason.

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MO: I saw you. I was one of the very lucky people to see you in *Hamilton* and it was one of the most incredible theatrical experiences of my life and, uh,

REG: Wonderful.

MO: Yeah. My husband actually took me very early on in our relationship, like maybe too early on and he jokes that I married him because of *Hamilton* tickets.

REG: That means he really likes you.

MO: It's true, it's true. And they, they joke actually, there was a joke at our wedding that I married him because the *Hamilton* tickets, which is not true, but the show was that good. Um, and it's a, just one of those once-in-a-lifetime hits that crosses over to the popular imagination in a way that I, I don't think I've seen in my lifetime since, since maybe *Rent*. I mean, did you anticipate this kind of groundswell or was this just like blindsiding for you guys?

REG: Both we absolutely, you know, we were the first people to be, to be knocked over, you know? We, we that's, that's the honor that we had to be in the group of the first people that, you know, had a glimpse of, of this genius.

It was lightning in a bottle before, before we were involved in singing these parts and synonymous with these historical figures, um, we got to hear Lin's demos of these songs and, you know, It was the, it was the thing that brought us all to the table, like running, you know? And so we were always blown a bit way by it.

We all, you know, any, anything anyone else feels in the superlative about how wonderful this work is and how valuable and how important and how life-changing it hit. It hit us because we got to hear it first. Hmm. And, um, and so we always knew this. This has just changed my world. This just changed my world and, and, and it, and it will change the world.

It was almost distractingly, um, uh, powerful because like, I just was kept being like, I would sit in the audience, I mean, in, on the stage and wanna look at the audience and, and not sing my part and just say, 'See? See? Can you believe this?' I mean, we wanted to, we wanted to do that. You had to focus on, on actually doing your part and presenting it as opposed to like celebrating it with them.

And, um, I think what's exciting for us and, and, and continually blindsiding is, is, um, how big the explosion was. How, how far, um, a show, a theater, a music theater show could go and how, how many different, you know, explosions, it could have around like, you know, so, so often, especially in, in the world of media, as it currently exists, you know, something can be a hit, but it's never gonna be like 1980-something when everybody only had two or three channels to watch, and we were all trying to figure out who killed Jr. Like, that's not what the world we live in anymore. Right? Everybody has their

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own playlist. So we're not all listening to the sit, you know, we're not dependent on like the water cooler moment.

And so, um, in the world of hits. Something seismic is just, I think feels a bit more rare. Um, and so, um, to imagine a music theater show, being a seismic in that way, being a phenomenon is something I just, I've never personally experienced. So I wouldn't know, like, and I said I was in *Lion King* and I was in, um, and I was in *Rent*, and there, that, I mean, God, I mean, I wasn't in the original *Lion King*, so I was, I was, you know, but I was, I was at the end. I was, I was on the stage. Uh, the closing night I was, I was Mimi in *Rent*. Um, like I definitely, before I was a part of that company knew how crazy and amazing and huge it was and how much bigger it was than what Broadway typically gets to be, I mean, you know, Stevie Wonder had a song on the radio, you know, for *Rent*. I mean, it, it definitely crossed over and, you know, and, and there was the, there was a *Chorus Line* before us, you know, and we were compared to it pretty early, which was daunting, but I still, you know, it's, it's something it's, it's a kind of success that, um, you, you can't expect, um, you want it always, we always, definitely want it. Everything. We, you know, everything we've ever done and we continue to do, we want that kind of success for it, but that's, that's a, a rare, rare gift.

The most blindsiding is that it continues to, um, be so relevant and it continues to be such a blessing to all of us.

MO: In many ways you have such a, knock on wood, I don't wanna Jinx you but, just such an incredible track record with the shows that you've done and now you're doing *She-Hulk* and my personal favorite, *Girls5eva*, which I think I've blasted through in maybe two days. How have you enjoyed that?

REG: Well, I was doing television for a long time, before, the soap opera was a, was really a great learning ground for me and, uh, and definitely felt like, you know, the, the biggest fame I had had up to that point. Um, but um, but yeah, I had been, I mean, I, even in a phenomenon kind of arena, I was on *Ally McBeal* for many years, for like five years and a, you know, I wasn't like a star from it, but I, I saw people turn into superstars because *Ally McBeal* was such a, such a huge whopping hit. Even *The Good, The Good Wife*, you know, was a show that I was on before I was in *Hamilton*. So I had, you know, an opportunity to really experience how wonderful television is and can be. Um, uh, I just feel like we all kind of raised a level or two, you know, we all got, you know, we, we really had more access and opportunity from *Hamilton*.

So I just kind of feel like in, in terms of the people in, in that company, whatever you were doing, you got to, you got to spread your wings a little bit more. Um, sure. And so we've been able to, um, you know, kind of star in shows and originate roles in, in, in shows and, and that's a gift from *Hamilton* for sure.

But, but it's, but television, um, is just, it's wonderful. I mean, it's, it's a wonderful, I was just telling a mom friend actually this morning on the phone, um, 'cause she, uh, books concerts and she has to be at

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them all the time so she was complaining about the fact that she never gets to go, go to any 'cause she, you know, she works on nights and weekends and I'm like, 'Hello, that's why I love television and film so much,' because you get to sit down with, you know, the audience and watch it. You know what I mean? You get to, you get to actually be, you know, beyond the schedule of the rest of the world. Um, and you know, have a regular workday. Um, otherwise our workday is when everyone else is off and so you feel a little left out of, of the party sometimes.

MO: Sure. Sure.

REG: So that, so yeah, I, I love television film for, for a number of reasons and that's one of them. And, and one thing I love about, you know, watching, um, you know, Ariana Debose and Lin-Manuel Miranda, and, and things, you know, we've been able to do, you know, that's, that's the beauty of *Girls5eva* is we are doing so much of the things we, so much of our talent from music theater is being used, um, in film and television so it feels like the best of both worlds.

MO: Oh, absolutely. And *Girls5eva*, and if anybody is not already on the *Girls5eva* train, because I feel like I am a *Girls5eva* disciple I tell everybody that they should be watching it if they're not already and I talk to everybody who is watching it, your character Wickie is, has to be just one of the most fun characters you've ever played.

REG: Oh, definitely. So much fun, so much fun. She is. She is really a trip. Um, but I enjoy her so much because, uh, it just allows me to not censor any bad, selfish instinct I've ever had in my life. Oh, so funny,

It's, it's, yeah, it's a wonderful show starring Sara Bareilles, Paula Pell and Busy Phillips. it's, uh, written by Meredith Scardino, and, you know, Tina Fey is one of the producers on it. We have, um, a team of amazing producers, a team of, uh, of, of fantastic actors, so many of them great New York actors because, you know, Tina and Jeff Richmond, um, another one of the producers who writes all the music and is amazing, um, because they are part of the Broadway theater community with their hits and *Mean Girls* and whatnot, they pull in so many great theater actors into, into the show and a lot of their own, you know, kind of friends and actors they've known and loved. So, the talent pool is sick, to quote my daughter.

MO: Yeah, to quote your daughter. It's also fun 'cause it's one of those shows where you're like, 'Wait, is that Bowen Yang from *Saturday Night Live*? Oh, ok. He's in this episode.' It's just, it is,

REG: And, and they're brilliant. They're all brilliant.

MO: It's a nonstop parade of hits.

REG: People that, you know, people that you knew, people that you don't know yet, they have impeccable taste and the writing is so good. Quite honestly, my own experience, I feel like, let I just get

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the words out everyone's gonna laugh. Because, oh, it's so funny. Yeah. It's a, it's a show about a one-hit wonder girl group from the 90s who, you know, decide they're going for a comeback 20 years later and, uh, they're hilarious.

MO: It really does, I think, also hit on this moment of reboots and give you this like insight into what that experience might be like, and it is just, you know, as somebody who listened to 90s girl groups, just such a, oh my God, such an incredible trip. I love it so much.

REG: Yeah. And it's, it's, it's uh, it's, you know, having been here in the 90s, a lot of the things that we spoof, I, I was there when it happened the first time and I didn't realize how absurd it was.

I think that's been really funny. Like, I'm like, wow. This totally, actually happened to me and I didn't know that I should have been offended at the time!

MO: Oh my gosh.

REG: It's a, yeah, it's really, it's, it's a wonderful thing to, to look at ourselves and laugh and most importantly for, to see, you know, women, um, being this unapologetically ambitious, that's the best thing.

MO: Oh yeah.

REG: They are so ambitious and you know, they're, you know, that I just, we should never stop. Why should we stop? Why should we stop singing and dancing together in, in coordinated clothing? I think, I just think that's a fabulous thing to continue bringing into the 40s and 50s and 60s. I think it's wonderful.

MO: What's coming up next for you, for all fans who are excited to follow?

REG: I'm actually gonna get off the phone and watch the next four episodes of *She-Hulk*. I'm really excited about that.

MO: Ah.

REG: I saw the first four at the premiere for the first time and I was over-the-moon excited, you know, like I said, I'm on a really, really just kind of spit-take funny show, *Girls5eva*, and then, um, *She-Hulk* is also a comedy. And so I was like, is this gonna be funny too? And I was, I was relieved and glad when I saw it and I just, you know, became an instant fan. I'm already a Marvel fan, but you know, to be a fan of, you know, the, the worlds, the Marvel worlds are so different from each other. They've been so brave and diverse, um, in terms of the shows and the way they've told so many different stories in this universe, and this I think is a, is a brand-new one and it, it works really well. So I'm gonna watch the next, the, the last four episodes, I think, of it and I'll get to see myself 'cause I do, I do more in the last half.

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MO: Oh, that's fun.

REG: Yeah. Super fun. And then I gotta keep working on my album 'cause I gotta, I have, I have to figure out now, um, when I started it about, ugh, a year and a half ago, I had a big, a series of songs that I loved and then in the last year I've written about six or seven more songs that I love and I gotta figure out how to pare this down, finish producing it and get it out to the world because I have so many concerts coming up between now and the next, the end of the year and I'd like to keep pulling these songs into the show.

MO: Oh, that's so great. Well, that's so exciting and I cannot wait to hear your album and I'm sure everyone in New Jersey is very excited to catch you at Mayo PAC and, um, thank you so much for your time. It's such an honor to talk to you. I'm so excited.

REG: I'm excited to be there. You know, I'm a New Yorker and which basically means I'm a, you know, New Jersey is my home, so, oh yeah. I feel like this is like almost the closest to home I've ever been. So we're coming out and we're, uh, we're gonna, we're gonna make it a homecoming.

MO (Voiceover):

For more information on Opening Night: An Evening with Renée Elise Goldsberry, visit MayoArts.org.

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I'm Maddie Orton for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

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