

CURTAIN CALL

UHart alumni
front and center on
Broadway stage

JOHN CLANCY



If you attended the first Tony Awards ceremony at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in 1947, you shelled out \$7 for a ticket.

That's how much producer Orin Wolf '01, orchestrator John Clancy '96, and actress Riza Takahashi '14 would have to shell out today to buy a couple of salty pretzels on the sidewalks of New York City.

Chances are they may indeed sneak a pretzel or two, for all three Hartt School graduates are busy Broadway professionals, each involved in a production honored at the 2018 Tony Awards held last June at Radio City Music Hall.

Wolf produced the musical *The Band's Visit* that won 10 Tony Awards, including Best Musical of the Year. Clancy was nominated for Best Orchestration for his work on the musical *Mean Girls*. And Takahashi is a member of the lively *Mean Girls* ensemble.

While things may have changed in Manhattan since 1947, many of the everlasting realities of The Hartt School remain the same. The number of successful theater, television, film, and music professionals who have trained on campus remains impressively high. In fact, each year, multiple students are signed to professional contracts prior to their graduation. It all starts with the faculty—Hartt instructors continue to be praised for their willingness and flexibility to help students explore individual artistic visions—even if it's not part of the regular curriculum.

ORIN WOLF

RIZA TAKAHASHI





In fact, that's how **Orin Wolf** got his start as a producer.

Wolf, who was studying acting as an undergraduate, asked if he could produce a night of one-act plays. When given the go-ahead, he handled everything from fundraising to crew selection. Hartt allowed an entrepreneurial environment to blossom where other schools, Wolf speculates, might not have been so accommodating. He recalled another experience when, during a play rehearsal, the air conditioning broke and he spent hours in a frantic search for portable fans. When he was through, the director smirked at the exhausted student and said, "That's what a producer does!" To Wolf, it wasn't a cheeky comment; it was a call to action. He liked to make things happen. Between the night of one-acts and being a rehearsal savior, he found his calling.

After graduating, he started his own off-Broadway booking company, and was also selected for a new program at Columbia University in which participants learn the business from legendary producer Hal Prince, a program for which Wolf eventually assumed directorship.

Wolf soon met a fellow Hartt grad at Hartford Stage, where there was a reading for a straight play called *The Band's Visit*. He had seen the independent movie on which it was based and liked it a lot. The story concerns an Egyptian policemen's band that inadvertently gets stranded in a Jewish town in Israel.

"I like the notion of strangers stuck in a place," Wolf says. It's a literary device he remembers from his Hartt days studying the plays of Ibsen, Chekov, O'Neill, and Mamet. When the decision was made to turn *The Band's Visit* into a musical, it was knocked off Hartford Stage's radar and firmly into Wolf's hands. He took it to off-Broadway's Atlantic Theater Company, where it premiered in November 2016, and then to Broadway's Ethel Barrymore Theatre in 2017.

"I bring an understanding of what the actor needs," Wolf says about his role as producer—a nod to his acting days at the University.

Raised in Cleveland, Wolf credits Hartt with fostering in him the spirit of independence and creative adventure. "We learned that you have to make do with what you've got. It was a place to explore and tap into your passions."

Wolf worked on *The Band's Visit* for almost a decade before Bernadette Peters announced his name on the Radio City stage to accept a Tony for Best Musical of the Year. He had invited the entire cast, co-producers, and investors—another echo from his undergraduate experience, where collaboration and camaraderie were essential ingredients.

John Clancy was also at the Tony Awards that same evening, as a nominee for his *Mean Girls* orchestration. Though he didn't win, Clancy was honored by the nomination. He understands the role of an orchestrator is unfamiliar to many people, different than the best actor that everyone understands. The orchestrator—what Clancy does—takes tunes that



“

**I DANCED, SANG,
AND IN THE LAST
ROUND READ FOR
THE PART OF JANIS.
TINA LAUGHED.
THAT'S ALL I
NEEDED. I MADE
TINA FEY LAUGH!**

—RIZA TAKAHASHI

someone else wrote and assigns instruments and notes to those tunes to achieve a certain emotional effect. It's a skill and talent that he has mastered over his professional career.

Clancy studied music composition and theory at Hartt, and credits his professors with opening up his mind and his ears. They eagerly let a self-described, uncompromising hard-rock drummer study genres such as classical, jazz, and chamber music. "I was even turned on to the harp," he notes merrily. "I didn't think too much about harps before then!"

The Connecticut native subsequently worked on *Shrek*, *The Musical* in 2009 (and was nominated for a Tony), *Fun Home* in 2015 (another nomination), and *Tuck Everlasting* in 2016.

A big part of anyone's success—even those who are extremely talented—is finding the right place and getting there at the right time. Making yourself known is essential. Clancy made sure that happened. While playing in the pit for a show in development at the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam, Conn., he was introduced to a music director who hired him to work at the Public Theater in New York City. It was while performing at Joe's Pub (part of the Public Theater) that he was seen by Jeanine

Tesori, the composer of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, who was writing a new musical, *Caroline, Or Change*. He made an impression and she asked him to work with her.

It was during the *Caroline* workshop that Clancy helped develop a percussion style that duplicated the sounds of washing machines and pots and pans, which, as it turned out, was an important element for the show. “Jeanine pushed me to do things I didn’t think I could do,” Clancy says proudly. As a result, she later hired him as an associate orchestrator on *Shrek*.

One of Clancy’s greatest joys is when he sees individual instrumentalists enjoy what he wrote for them. Recently, a short piece from his *Mean Girls* orchestration played at Radio City, confirming for him that musicians appreciate what he is able to do for them.



So do audiences—even if *they* don’t completely understand the elements of orchestration Clancy has mastered.

But everybody knows what ensemble players do. They sing, dance, and add to a show’s overall comic hijinks. That’s **Riza Takahashi’s** job eight times a week in *Mean Girls*.

There may be just 120 miles between Hartford and Broadway, but Takahashi traveled much farther than Wolf or Clancy to get there. She grew up in a small town outside of Osaka, Japan.

With a lifelong love of theater, Takahashi decided to go to a performing arts high school in Vancouver, where she lived with a host family. She was determined to make swift progress on her

English, and with her strong academic performance, she was confident enough to apply to American colleges. After being accepted to UHart, she decided Connecticut would be the next stop on her journey.

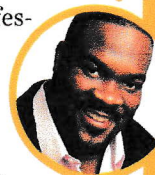
Takahashi credits her Hartt professors with helping her focus on her goal. They listened to any concerns and helped in any way they could, she recalls. She immersed herself in studies and performance, and was eventually cast in the regional productions of *Spamalot* and *Mamma Mia!* When an opportunity came along to audition for *Mean Girls*, based on the Tina Fey screenplay, Takahashi found herself in a real-life version of *A Chorus Line*, in an open audition call with dozens of hopefuls, which was culled to 30, then to five.

“Tina was in the room,” she recalls. “I danced, sang, and in the last round read for the part of Janis. Tina laughed. That’s all I needed. I made Tina Fey laugh!”

Two days later, Takahashi was told she had a part in the ensemble and would understudy the role of Janis.

Landing on the Great White Way on Broadway at such a young age is inspiring in its own right, but what makes it extra special for Takahashi is how the show speaks directly to teens—an age from which she’s not that far removed. When thinking about current and future Hartt students, Takahashi reiterates that when you have talent, professors who care, and a can-do attitude, anything is possible.

That’s the way it’s been throughout the years for graduates of The Hartt School. Riza Takahashi, John Clancy, and Orin Wolf represent countless other students who took advantage of Hartt’s hundreds of annual performances, inspiring master classes, and passionate faculty to hone their craft and to unleash their individual artistic expression. **H**



THE LIST GOES ON

More UHart alumni who have won or been nominated for the entertainment world’s top honors...

Philip Boykin '95

- 2018 Tony Winner—Best Revival of a Musical, *Once on This Island* (Principal Cast Member)

Peter Castellano '99

- 2016 Emmy Winner—Outstanding Live Graphic Design, World Cup of Hockey

Mike Dobson '05

- 2018 Tony Nominee—Best Sound Design, *Sponge Bob Square Pants*

Jimmy Greene '94

- 2015 Grammy Nominee—Best Arrangement, Instruments and Vocals, *When I Come Home* (Arranger with Javier Colon)
- 2015 Grammy Nominee—Best Jazz Instrumental Album, *Beautiful Life*

Christopher Jahnke '96

- 2012 Tony Nominee—*The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess* (Orchestration)

Joey LaBrasca '17

- 2018 Tony Winner—Best Play, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (Cast Member)

David Pritikin '94

- 2014 and 2015 Emmy Winner—Outstanding Unstructured Reality Program, *Deadliest Catch* (Executive Producer)
- 2013 Emmy Nominee—Outstanding Reality Program, *Deadliest Catch*
- 2005 and 2006 Emmy Nominee—Outstanding Reality Competition Program, *Survivor* (Producer '05, Supervising Producer '06)

Shane Shanahan M'98

- 2018 Tony Nominee—*Mean Girls* (Orchestra)
- 2016 Grammy Winner—Silk Road Ensemble’s album *Sing Me Home* (Percussionist)

