

# Celia Berk and Elizabeth Sullivan

Together in  
Conversation  
and Song

With Betsyann Faiella

**O**n this Mother's Day, May 12, at NYC's Laurie Beechman Theatre, Celia Berk will reprise *A Dream and a Song: The Musical Stories of Elizabeth Sullivan* with special-guest songwriter Elizabeth Sullivan. Following the show's December debut at Urban Stages' *Winter Rhythms*, we asked the two to interview each other.



KT Sullivan

What followed was a conversation between the award-winning singer and the 94-year-old matriarch of the Sullivan family about creativity, love and loss, family and faith.

**Celia Berk** Was anything about your life revealed to you as we told your story through your music and poems?

**Elizabeth Sullivan** What a question! It was such an experience. I never really thought I had anything to give. I just knew—maybe because I was a Depression Baby—that I didn't want to waste anything I might have. It may not be very much, but it's mine to do, and we've got to honor the gifts we've been given. That's why I went back to school. I wanted, needed, to learn how to arrange, orchestrate, notate!

**Celia** What kind of courage did it take to enroll in the University of Oklahoma at the age of 49 when your youngest of eight children was 12?

**Elizabeth** It was frightening to walk out on that campus and see all those big, marvelous buildings and the professors and students, a world I didn't know. I spent the first five-and-a-half years in music classes. Then I studied literature and poetry writing. It took me 26 years to graduate, but I made Phi Beta Kappa at the same time

I was doing all the things I needed to do as a mama.

**Celia** Amazing. You know, on the surface we are so

different—generationally and religiously. I'm a New Yorker, and I describe you as "an elegant woman of the prairie." Yet there are important things we have in common. One is what you just

described—knowing the terror of declaring to yourself and others what you need to be doing, how much it matters to do it well, and never believing it's too late.

**Elizabeth** Yes, even with our backgrounds being different, we are one. And I'm so excited about singing my new song "We Are One" in May. Vive la difference, my dear!

**Celia** We've talked a lot about how your faith informs everything you

do. There's your song "Shekinah, Come." That's a Hebrew word meaning the presence of God in the world. And although you wrote it more than 35 years ago, it could have been written about the darkness in the world today and *how you find your way through*. There are other songs where you talk about praying or kneeling. How else does faith inform your writings?

**Elizabeth** I heard a friend say recently, "My faith has not changed; my theology has." I've been on this long journey, growing and becoming more caring, curious, and accepting of others. A great humility has settled in. There is so much to question, but I'm relaxed in not knowing the answers. I'm

Jewish at this particular moment. For the first time in my life, I don't feel safe. But it's made me more empathetic of other people who, every day, don't feel safe because of some aspect of who they are.

**Elizabeth** You have an empathy that reaches out to all who are suffering, and I recognize it.

**Celia** And vice versa!

**Elizabeth** Now I have a question! When did you know this gift of your voice was heard, and were you encouraged to continue to use that glorious instrument?

**Celia** Oh my gosh! I don't know that I had those exact moments. But I can tell you when I started to think of myself as a singer. My younger brother died, and in that moment, I thought, "This either leaves a hole or a space—and it has to be a space or I'll lose my mind." Around the same time, I was sent a gift, a paperweight, which said, "What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?" And I instantly thought, "I would sing." So, I filled that space with music.

**Elizabeth** Celia, I cherish what you do and the way you use your acting training too, because I believe a singer must be an actor as well. You bring the two together in a beautiful way.

**Celia** Thank you, Elizabeth. The music that interests me the most has to have something at stake that needs to be explored. I always feel that way about your songs. I know our audience found things to identify with or that gave them a way to think about something that might help them feel safe or less alone.

**Elizabeth** That's what we do, Celia—connect. That's what we hope for.



Conor Weiss



Conor Weiss

embracing all that comes through, and I hope that translates in my writings. My favorite word now is *gratitude*. I think our faith supports that, don't you?

**Celia** I very much do. I've confided in you about what it means to be

These pages:  
Celia Berk (left)  
and Elizabeth  
Sullivan at Urban  
Stages' 2023  
Winter Rhythms

CELIA BERK and  
ELIZABETH SULLIVAN

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And we get the pleasure! Our Urban Stages audience was so great, and yes, *they were with us, Celia!*

**Celia** Indeed! A lot of your writings are about what it means to be part of a family. What would you like people to really know about yours?

**Elizabeth** I'd like them to know that we love one another in spite of all our differences, in spite of all our foibles. We always show up when we need one another. I speak of my eight children in the present tense, though as you know, I lost my son, Danny Boy, who had so much to live for, was so creative, so wonderful. I lost my Jim in 2009 and he was the best husband and father ever. He taught us so many things. I just wrote a poem about him. He's being remembered and honored and so loved.

**Celia** I deeply connect to the way you write about grief in "Remember You." You are saying, "I don't need to *remember* you, you've never left me, I carry you with me every day." There's another song, "Big Waves and Little Ripples" that you spent close to *half a century* finishing to your

satisfaction. How can you know when a song is done?

Elizabeth and Celia take a bow at Urban Stages' 2023 *Winter Rhythms*



**Elizabeth** I think you just know. It was in the '70s that I got the idea for that song, but it ended up with a silly little ending. I put it aside, knowing it wasn't finished. It didn't say what I really wanted to say. All those years later, it came to me to change the last line from "and somebody will remember me" to "even when no one remembers me."

It was finished when I changed that last line. I've sung it many times at memorial services, and people identify with it.

**Celia** After *Winter Rhythms*, a friend who is a teacher told us, "I want that song. I want to

teach it in my class." There's something so universal about the idea that some people "make a great big wave in life crashing up against the shore" and "others only circle ripples 'round a pool, that's never as it was before." So, it's not that you don't leave any mark, just maybe not in big, dramatic ways. We all can "change the plot."

**Elizabeth** We all have some kind of gift, a light that needs to be given. Would that our candle shine and sputter to the finish, all the wax—ev'ry bit of wick—be spent. ○

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Editor's note

Celia and Elizabeth are at NYC's Laurie Beechman Theatre on May 12, 2024 at 2 pm.  
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