

‘The Heidi Chronicles’ Is Trailed by Questions of Feminism and Legacy

By **MICHAEL PAULSON** and **JENNIFER SCHUESSLER** APRIL 22, 2015 [The New York Times](#)



Elisabeth Moss in the Broadway revival of “The Heidi Chronicles.”

CreditSara Krulwich/The New York Times

Twenty-five years after “The Heidi Chronicles” closed on Broadway, believers in the work of Wendy Wasserstein seized an opening. In the era of “Lean In” and “Girls,” and a paucity of female voices on Broadway, they would revive Ms. Wasserstein’s most acclaimed play, “The Heidi Chronicles,” with a beloved television star, Elisabeth Moss, in the title role.

The show opened to strong reviews, even from critics who had expressed hesitation about whether a story borne out of gender debates in the 1980s would still be relevant today. But the play consistently failed to draw audiences, and on Tuesday night the producers announced that it would close on May 3 after just 80 performances — raising questions about Ms. Wasserstein’s legacy and her place in contemporary feminist discussion.

Lena Dunham raved about the revival on Twitter, calling it “a totally gorgeous show” and saying that Ms. Wasserstein had “greatly” inspired her own TV series, “Girls.” But the lively world of online feminism that regular buzzes with discussions of “Girls” — or “Mad Men,” which stars Ms. Moss as the protofeminist Peggy Olson — has taken little notice of the show (and pays little attention to theater in general).

“It represents a moment in feminism that has passed,” said Jill Dolan, a Princeton University theater professor who is writing a critical study of Ms. Wasserstein’s work. “The question ‘Can we have it all?’ is just not the main question that American feminism is asking right now.”

Chloe Angyal, a columnist for feministing.com with a Ph.D. in media studies, said that Ms. Wasserstein still held symbolic importance, but that she didn’t know the play and had only read about it in reviews. She saw it as a reflection of a privileged, upper-middle-class, second-wave feminism that the younger feminists of today want to distance themselves from, while still acknowledging their indebtedness.

“There is a very strong ‘not your mother’s feminism’ bent among young activists and writers and journalists I know today,” she said. “We are working really hard to decenter feminism from the world of Manhattan-dwelling, Broadway-going feminists. Not that their problems aren’t real. But they are not representative of a majority of people who need feminism today.”

The closing is a disappointment for Ms. Wasserstein’s champions, who have worked hard to promote her work since she died in 2006 at 55. But in interviews on Wednesday, they argued that the show’s fortunes said more about the Broadway audience than it did about the long-term significance of Ms. Wasserstein’s work.

“The Heidi Chronicles” drew praise, both when it was first staged and again this year, for its depiction of the struggles that women face balancing careers and families. It won the Tony Award for best play and the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1989 and has been widely produced in other cities since then.

“Wendy Wasserstein’s plays continue to be produced all over the country and in Canada,” said Peter Hagan, the president of Dramatists Play Service Inc. “She is a playwright who continues to be produced.”

The revival, directed by Pam MacKinnon, stars Ms. Moss as an art historian, Heidi Holland, and Jason Biggs (“Orange Is the New Black”) and Bryce Pinkham (“A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder”) as longtime friends. Producers lost the entire capitalization, which was between \$3.5 million and \$4 million. The play had grossed \$2,565,125 as of Sunday, according to the Broadway League; last week, it played to half-empty theaters and grossed \$311,933.

Both the play and the current production have their critics. “There’s something that rings false about a piece like this — despite its neat ending, we know what happens next in the real world, and for most women it is not all lullabies and new houses,” said Holly L. Derr, a feminist media critic and artist-in-residence at Skidmore College.

Ms. Dolan of Princeton, who saw the play during its original run, said she had come around to “Heidi” after initially being enraged by it.

“I teach it as a history play,” she said.

Victoria Myers, a co-founder of [The Interval](http://TheInterval.com), a website about women and theater, called “Heidi” “a hugely important play,” and said, “I definitely still think it’s relevant.” However, she said that

younger people may not “understand the significance of the play, or even of Wendy Wasserstein and the barriers she broke. Those facts haven’t been adequately highlighted by the theater community.”

Several playwrights involved in the continuing struggle to see more productions of plays by women said it was unfair to ask about the implications of a Broadway failure.

“I’ve reread a number of Wendy’s plays in the past year or so, and they’re beautifully written plays filled with fresh, human insight,” said Lisa Kron, who wrote the book for the new musical “Fun Home.” “I can’t imagine that the life span of one production, particularly on Broadway, which is famously and universally treacherous to begin with, means anything about Wasserstein particularly. Does this question get asked when a Mamet play closes?”

And Theresa Rebeck, the author of “Seminar” and “Dead Accounts,” both on Broadway in recent seasons, said the attention to the popular reception of “Heidi” was a reminder of how rare it is to see a Broadway play by a woman.

“Every year it’s a terrible statistic — there should be more female voices, and then we wouldn’t all be obsessing on Wendy Wasserstein’s voice,” she said. “Wendy was writing at a time when she occupied a very essential place, naming the issues that were rising around feminism and women and culture, and since then the situation has gotten logarithmically more complicated.”

André Bishop, the artistic director of Lincoln Center Theater and one of Ms. Wasserstein’s literary executors, disputed the idea that the short Broadway run diminished Ms. Wasserstein’s stature. “If anything,” he said, “it enhanced her reputation and introduced her to a whole new generation of people who didn’t really know her.”

“For any good writer, their work goes through phases of acceptance and falling away and coming back — that’s part of the road all writers take, especially when they’re no longer alive,” Mr. Bishop added. “The sadness about Wendy is that she had a lot more plays in her, and the fact that she never lived to write them.”