

WWD

‘War Paint’ Themes Still Resonate in Modern Beauty Business

Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden were titans of the beauty business who still motivate women in the business today.

By Faye Brookman on April 13, 2017

Although the time frame is 1935 to 1964, the themes of “War Paint” now playing at The Nederlander Theater, echo the issues of the beauty business today. Patti LuPone as Helena Rubinstein and Christine Ebersole as Elizabeth Arden, duke it out while lamenting everything from transparency in ingredient labeling to emerging competitors — issues still prevalent today.

A panel of powerful women in the beauty business discussed War Paint’s themes following a performance moderated by Jodi Katz, founder and creative director of Base Beauty Creative Agency.

The panelists were Laura Geller, founder of Laura Geller; Ukonwa Ojo, senior vice president for Cover Girl; Christina Bennett, senior director, global public relations for Elizabeth Arden; and Catherine Zuber, “War Paint’s” costume designer.

Katz saw an opportunity to link the play with women in beauty today. “Our job is to shine a spotlight on beauty brands. So how could we not want to be a part of celebrating beauty on Broadway. Plus as an entrepreneur I see so much of myself in Elizabeth and Helena. ‘War Paint’ shows that growing a business as a woman in the beauty industry is completely different, seductive and thrilling.”

With a nod to the two titans of the cosmetics business, the speakers discussed the importance of past and present female mentors. “We stand on the shoulders of giants,” said Ojo. “I love this industry because it is women running it — my leadership team is full of women. It is great to collaborate in an industry truly doing great things to make people feel better about themselves.”

The creativity of Arden is still palpable today at the company, according to Bennett. “What’s unique about this business is that it is fueled by women — it is such a different atmosphere than where I’ve worked or my friends talk about. It is great to have these amazing female mentors who have guided me and believe in pulling others up with them.”



Jodi Katz, Laura Geller, Ukonwa Ojo, Catherine Zuber and Christina Bennett discuss War Paint.

Zuber added it was a pleasure to design for two female leads versus the traditional man and woman. “It’s wonderful to bring beauty into the world. As Helena Rubinstein says, there are no ugly women, just lazy ones,” she chuckled quoting the play.

Bringing the story to the stage reminded Katz about the impact the entrepreneurs had on the cosmetics business — especially during a period when “nice” women didn’t paint their faces. “It’s incredibly humbling to be reminded of the journey of these global brands that these two women created a century ago,” she said.

For Geller, it was truly a full-circle experience. “I’m sitting on a stage which is where I got my first job,” said the beauty entrepreneur who got her start as a makeup artist.

Rubinstein and Arden faced heated competition from each other, but also from other cosmetics pioneers. It hasn’t changed, the panel agreed, and that’s not always bad.

“The competition, [the] rivalry is still alive and I think it is what compels all of us,” said Geller whose brand turns 20 this year. “I think it is healthy and I think there is room for everybody. It keeps everyone on [their] toes.”

Competition is good, but it can’t be done to sacrifice the customers’ desires, cautioned Ojo. “We can’t be so obsessed in keeping up that we lose site of the very people we exist to delight.”

The experts agreed that some of the competitive challenges beauty pioneers Rubinstein and Arden faced decades ago — reflected in “War Paint” by newcomer Charles Revson — mirror today’s market where emerging indie brands challenge the legends. Ironically, in the end, Elizabeth Arden’s company is now part of Revlon, the company rival Revson built.