

<http://jewishexponent.com/2017/11/08/thanksgiving-gluten-free-bread-highlights-new-musical/>

# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

November 8, 2017

## Thanksgiving with Gluten-Free Bread Highlights New Musical



From left: Ginna Le Vine, Julius Thomas III, Ann Harada and Jillian Gottlieb | Photo provided

By  
Marissa Stern

Jillian Gottlieb randomly decided to go to an audition one day after moving to New York.

After getting cast, she decided, "I think I can do this."

The Linwood, N.J., native had no intentions of going into theater; she did a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* in high school, but wasn't a "theater kid."

Starting Nov. 7, she will be on the stage of the Bucks County Playhouse as part of its world premiere of *The New World*.

The musical takes place in 1620, but its description could also apply to the nearest hipsterized coffee shop in a gentrified neighborhood in 2017.

"The Native Americans are enjoying a gluten-free, low-carb, artisanally happy life when they are invaded by the nation's first immigrants — pilgrims!"

Gottlieb plays Susanna Standish, a pilgrim, who meets and falls in love with Santuit, a Native American, played by Julius Thomas III.

Gottlieb studied for a year at The University of the Arts, and then spent another year studying opera at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University before dropping out and moving to Atlanta. There, she pursued songwriting for a while.

"I thought for a while I was going to be an opera singer," she recalled. "I always loved opera and I loved my time at Mason Gross studying opera. I just didn't have that fire inside of me for opera, and then when I found theater, immediately I was like, 'Oh, this is what I'm supposed to be doing with the rest of my life.'"

Gottlieb described *The New World* as "really a love story at its core."

"The producers are calling it a fractured fairy tale, which it really is," said Gottlieb, who's played Rapunzel in another fractured fairy tale, *Into the Woods*, "and my character brings together these two completely different groups of people and unites them in a really beautiful way. To get to be the character that does that, that kind of brings the whole show together, is really, really special to me."

"Jillian is one those creative artists that continue to amaze me," said the musical's director Stafford Arima. "She is inventive beyond belief and a true talent. It's been such a thrill collaborating with her on this project."

While there is no discernible Jewish connection to this story, theater has played a profound role in Gottlieb's own Jewish identity.

In late 2015, the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene revived the Yiddish operetta *The Golden Bride (Di Goldene Kale)*, in which Gottlieb played Khanele and was called "a revelation" and "effervescently daffy" by *The New York Times*.

"That audition was entirely in Yiddish, which I do not speak," Gottlieb recalled, noting she grew up Reform and had a Bat Mitzvah but was not overly religious growing up.

That changed after *The Golden Bride*.

"When I got that show and started performing that show," she said, "I found a love for my Jewish culture and Yiddish in particular, the language. I fell madly in love with it."

She started taking Yiddish classes after the show ended its run and plans to start again after *The New World*.

"It sparked such a love for speaking the language and just being a South Jersey Jew in general," she laughed. "It felt like I was doing a service to my history."

That's not to say she had no tangible evidence of her Jewish background before, though it mostly comes through in her sense of humor, in which she imbues each character she plays.

She grew up listening to tapes with Jewish jokes and performers.

"I bring it with me everywhere. I wear my religion proudly and I'm not scared to do some — I don't want this to sound bad — but I'm not scared to stereotypically play the funny Jewish girl," she said. "I kind of have found my niche, and that is it. So in every audition, I bring that part of me into the room and in every show that I do."

With Susanna, she will still get the chance to bring humor and quirkiness to the role. Audiences can expect to laugh a lot with *The New World*, she said.

And she warned you might walk out of the performance humming every song.

"The biggest surprise was how funny this show is," she said. "I can't believe they found a way to tell this story that's supposed to be set in 1620 with such humor and grace, they just tell it really beautifully, and it's just hysterical."

Amid the message of love are also the ideals of unity and togetherness — it is around the time of Thanksgiving, after all.

“In the times we’re living in now, it’s really important to send this message of positivity and a message of everyone coming together despite their differences,” she said. “That’s what it really is: It’s two completely separate groups of people that figure out that they’re the same at the end of the day and they can be friends.

“It’s really just a beautiful story of coming together despite your differences, and also the music is absolutely gorgeous.”