

## Musical about Ella Fitzgerald opens Long Wharf season



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New York singer actress Tina Fabrique will be playing the great jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald in "Ella" which is opening the Long Wharf Theatre season on Wednesday. Photo: Contributed Photo / Connecticut Post Contributed

The life and music of Ella Fitzgerald are presented in "Ella" written by Jeffrey

Hatcher, which has been playing regional theaters around the country for the past five years. Photo: Contributed Photo / Connecticut Post Contributed



Ella Fitzgerald faced hardships in her life but preferred not to look back and became one of the few great jazz stars without public image problems. Her story is told through music in "Ella" opening at Long Wharf Wednesday. Photo: Contributed Photo / Connecticut Post Contributed

Tina Fabrique is starring in "Ella" which kicks off the 2010-2011 season at New Haven's Long Wharf Theatre on Wednesday. Photo: Contributed Photo / Connecticut Post Contributed

Ella Fitzgerald was one of the few jazz greats who never carried a tragic "legend" around with her.

She didn't die young from drug addiction.

She didn't have a reputation for missing shows -- or

singing in a physically-ravaged style -- like such deeply troubled peers as Billie Holiday and Anita O'Day.

The Fitzgerald "legend" and a huge fan base that included such singers as Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett were grounded not on image, but sheer talent -- the star's great voice and her ability to mine every bit of emotion and humor out of any song she chose to sing.

Fitzgerald died 14 years ago at the of 79, but her life and her style of singing are back in the form of "Ella," a musical that is kicking off the new Long Wharf Theatre season Wednesday, Sept. 22.

The New York actress and singer Tina Fabrique has been working on the show for the past few years. The journey started in Hartford at Theatre Works; the critical and audience response was so strong that the piece has been booked by theaters all over the country.

Fabrique said in a recent interview that her respect for Fitzgerald has deepened with every engagement of the show and that she is honored to be playing such an important figure in the history of American popular music.

"She came up in a time where the first question was, 'Can you really sing?'" Fabrique said of the jazz and pop music scenes of the pre-rock era, when musicians were judged almost purely on the basis of their talent.

Fitzgerald wasn't just gifted with an awesome instrument, but could sing equally well with a small jazz combo, a studio orchestra, or with fellow artists like Sinatra.

In the middle of her career, in the 1950s, Fitzgerald went into the studio with arranger Nelson Riddle and an orchestra to record a series of "Songbook" albums devoted to a single composer -- such as "The Gershwin Songbook" -- that feature peerless renditions of such tunes as "But Not for Me" and "S'Wonderful."

In our phone interview, Fabrique shared my amazement that each of these albums were recorded by Fitzgerald in a few days' time -- brief studio stops in the middle of her grueling touring schedule.

"That seemed to be her history as far as work in the studio went," Fabrique said of the "Songbook" sessions.

"Everything she ever recorded she tended to do in one take, or maybe two. What that means is that she was an artist who was always ready, always prepared, because she had worked out a lot of the creative stuff before she ever got into the studio. That's something that is lacking in young singers today," the performer said of contemporary stars who have been known to take weeks -- or even months -- to record an album's worth of songs.

"She really worked hard," Fabrique said of Fitzgerald.

"When I've looked at some of her itineraries for a year I get a little sick. There she was performing seven days a week, flying from one country to another in a day's time. That's crazy," the performer said with a mordant laugh.

The combination of Fitzgerald's voice and her phrasing never ceases to amaze Fabrique.

"The lyric was the thing for her. The meaning of the words was always there," she said.

Because Fitzgerald gravitated toward the best material, her recordings are as powerful today as when she made them.

"Great songs don't go out of style. What you are singing means everything," the actress said.

Fabrique emphasizes the fact that she is acting Fitzgerald, not imitating her.

"What I've tried to do is capture her essence, her personality. I'm not imitating her. ... I'm trying to find a shadow or a reflection of her with my instrument. As an actress my job is always to find the spine of a character. ... If I stopped and thought for a moment about how great and unbelievable a singer she was, I would have never done this show," she said.

When I mentioned the absence of traumatic legends surrounding Ella, Fabrique said that the star did suffer many tragedies in her life -- she wasn't able to "birth her own child" and wasn't able to sustain her marriage to "the greatest love of her life," fellow jazz artist Ray Brown.

"But, the thing with Ella was that she never looked back. She had a very dramatic childhood, too, but she didn't talk about it. ... She kept moving forward," Fabrique said.

The Long Wharf Theatre is at 222 Sargent Drive, New Haven, CT

First performance begins Wednesday at 7 p.m. Through Oct. 17.  
Tickets are \$42-\$72 - For more info - 203-787-4282, [www.longwharf.org](http://www.longwharf.org).

