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Living as a Legend

After 5 years & 22 theaters, Tina Fabrique launches a new wave of her acclaimed shows personifying Ella Fitzgerald



Vocal powerhouse Tina Fabrique stars in Theater Works' presentation of Ella - Off the Record, a musical portrait of Ella Fitzgerald. (Lanny Nagler - 09/19/10)

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Tina Fabrique looks the picture of serenity. Newly arrived in New Haven to start rehearsals for "Ella," which opens Long Wharf Theatre's season Wednesday, Fabrique sits in an outdoor

café on a sunlit September morning with the easy-going smile and demeanor of a woman who knows she has as close to a sure thing as you can have in the theater.

For the past five years, off and on, Fabrique has channeled the spirit and songs of jazz vocalist Ella Fitzgerald at more than 20 regional theaters, racking up big box office numbers, receiving waves of applause and earning a-ticket-a-basketful of glowing reviews

"Ella" has become the go-to show that artistic directors (not to mention managing directors) turn to when they need to lift their season's spirits — and take.

"'Ella' gave American regional theater a boost when it needed it," says Fabrique.

"It's been an unbelievable journey," she says. "I sure didn't know I was going to be doing this for five years when I started. I don't think anyone doing a regional theater production ever thinks something like this will happen, certainly the way that it did."

Began At Theater Works

The show began in 2005 at Hartford's Theater Works as "Ella: Off the Record," conceived by Rob Ruggiero and Dyke Garrison and directed by Ruggiero, associate artistic director there.

On the recommendation of music director and arranger Danny Holgate, Ruggiero went to see Fabrique in a production of "Crowns" at Hartford Stage and asked the actress-vocalist if she could scat-sing. As a former singer with the Duke Ellington Orchestra under Mercer Ellington, Fabrique had performed some Fitzgerald tunes over the years and regularly scat-sang with swinging ease.

For Ruggiero, Fabrique riffed on "How High the Moon." "And he gave me the job right there," she says.

During the Theater Works run, the actress-singer received critical acclaim, but it was clear the stage show, performed with a musical combo needed work.

The show was developed further at Florida Stage, which commissioned a new script and now shares in its development profits with Theater Works. (A percentage of profits also is donated to the Ella Fitzgerald Foundation.) The show was rewritten by Jeffrey Hatcher, a playwright adept at weaving biography, character and storytelling. Hatcher presented Fitzgerald's life within the structure of a concert and allowed his Ella to tell her story in her own way. "Jeffrey put it in the kind of voice Ella would have used," Fabrique says.

The setting is a 1966 show in Nice, France, just after Fitzgerald attends the funeral of her beloved half-sister back in the States. Honoring the commitment to perform, but in a reflective state, Fitzgerald — urged by her manager, Norman Granz, to develop her between-song patter — shares her life story with the audience.

Word about the shiny new "Ella" quickly spread, and additional bookings rolled in. "It became more and more alive as it went through the other theaters," Fabrique says. "But I just took it as it came. I realized it was taking off on its own, and I just sat back and enjoyed the ride."

The show has played such A-list venues as the Guthrie in Minneapolis; Arena Stage in Washington, D.C.; Cleveland Playhouse; and the Actors Theatre in Louisville, Ky. It returned to Connecticut in 2008, when it was a Summer Stage engagement at Hartford Stage.

Singing Was A Given

"When I got the role of Ella, singing was a given," says Fabrique, who performs two dozen signature tunes during the course of the show, including "That Old Black Magic," "They Can't Take That Away From Me." and "Lady Be Good."

"But I just didn't want to be an imitation of a singer," Fabrique says. "That's not the way to go. I don't think someone as wonderful as Ella can be reproduced vocally. At best, what you're trying to do is echo an authentic rendition of her. What I wanted to do was capture the spirit of the woman."

The much-beloved Fitzgerald did not have the dramatic or sordid history of such singers as Billie Holliday, Judy Garland or Bessie Smith. But her life wasn't quite as sunny as the shy singer's persona, either. Fitzgerald died in 1996 after years of decline from heart disease and diabetes. She was 79.

"One of the things I zeroed in on her was her shyness," Fabrique says. "When she got to know you, she was very warm, and there was even a kind of girlishness about her. But until then, she was quiet and reserved — that is, until it was time to get on stage, and then she was always on. She had such an in-the-moment sense to her, and scatting came out of that."

Fabrique says she can relate to that shyness and other aspects of Fitzgerald's life. "I grew up in Harlem. I sang at the Apollo and its Amateur Night, which is where she started. I worked [with big bands, too] with the Duke Ellington Orchestra and Mercer."

But unlike Fitzgerald, Fabrique has a family and the steady home life that Ella longed for. "I was fortunate to have married young and had two wonderful sons. I was able to

balance my home life and my creative life of being an entertainer, and it worked out fine for me."

More Vaughan

Though she shares Fitzgerald's coloring and cheekbones, Fabrique's natural "pipes" were more like those of another legendary jazz vocalist, Sarah Vaughan.

"But what I understood when I did more research was that both of these women considered their voices musical instruments: Ella was a trumpet, Sarah a saxophone. So I had to start rethinking my sax and bring things up to a higher range and take more of a soprano approach."

Fabrique also takes delight in telling Fitzgerald's personal story to audiences who only knew her from seeing her on TV or in concert. "All I ever wanted to do is present an authentic picture of Ella and bring the realness of this woman to an audience who never knew her," she says.

Another plus is knowing that she is introducing the vocal styling of the singer to a new generation of music lovers who can connect Fitzgerald's graceful, freewheeling scat singing with today's hip-hop. "It's just an eye-opener to see that response," she says.

The New Haven engagement is the beginning of a new "Ellapalooza" tour that will bring the show to larger presenting houses. Fabrique is committed for at least another two years. There are discussions about taking the show to Europe and Asia.

"It's been quite a blessing to have this gig in the first place," says Fabrique, "and then to have so much fun doing it."

"ELLA" begins previews Wednesday at Long Wharf Theatre, 222 Sargent Drive, New Haven. The show opens Sept. 29 and plays through Oct. 17. Performances are Tuesdays at 7 p.m., Wednesdays at 2 and 7 p.m., Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 3 and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 and 7 p.m. Tickets are \$35 to \$65. Information: 203-787-4282 or <http://www.longwharf.org>.