

'ELLA' arrives in Nashville

Tennessee Performing Arts Center hosts musical honoring 'The First Lady of Song'

by *Blake Boldt*

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ELLA, a highly-acclaimed musical about legendary singer Ella Fitzgerald, is coming to Tennessee Performing Arts Center on Tuesday, March 1 -



Tina Fabrique plays Ella Fitzgerald, "The First Lady of Song," in the Tennessee Performing Arts Center production, *ELLA*. Performances are Tuesday, March 1-Sunday, March 6. Photo provided.

Sunday, March 6.

Dubbed "The First Lady of Song," Ella Fitzgerald was the most popular female jazz singer in the United States for more than half a century. During her career, she won 13 Grammy awards and sold over 40

million albums. *ELLA* features more than a dozen of the singer's most famous hits, including "A Tisket, A Tasket," "How High the Moon," "That Old Black Magic" and "They Can't Take that Away from Me."

Tina Fabrique, a Broadway veteran and Tony Award-nominated performer for *Bring In Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk*, originated the role of Ella Fitzgerald in 2005, and she spoke with *Out & About Newspaper* about her commitment to this unique role.

How much knowledge of Ella's career did you have before you accepted this role?

I grew up in Harlem and my mother took me to see her perform at the Apollo Theater as a young girl. I knew even then that she was the voice of a lifetime and I have listened to her my entire career. I also sang with the Duke Ellington Orchestra for several years under the leadership of Mercer Ellington and he had me doing her music quite often. I must admit that except for a few comments from some musicians occasionally I never knew much about her private life.

What about Ella's life really resonated with you?

Her deep love and dedication to the music, her lack of ego as this gifted and talented woman. Ella never behaved like a "diva" it seemed. She just wanted to please her audiences. She worked hard doing that, even though she seemed to sing so seamlessly and effortlessly I know especially since I've been doing this show, what she did was much like walking on water musically. You can hear it in her live recordings that she seemed transported when she performed. Her humble beginnings that she overcame and grew from. She was courageous.

The preview teases that some of Ella's secrets will be revealed. Were you surprised about any parts of Ella's past?

Yes, I was surprised that she was on her own at such a young age and dancing for money on the streets of Harlem. In fact she was going to be a dancer and not a singer at her debut performance on the *Apollo Amateur Show*.

How do you prepare for such an important performance? And what are your previous impressions, if any, of Nashville and its audiences?

I live in preparation while doing this show. I was very lucky to have several friends who knew Ella and had lots of footage of her not only singing but being interviewed and talking freely about herself. I studied all that material in the beginning and I still study her now. The way I approached this role was as an actor. I figured to play Ella being able to sing is a given. I took in her mannerisms, her girlish behavior, her playfulness as she performed. I wanted to absorb the spirit of this woman and tell her story.

Singing is a very physical act. You must be able to really breathe to sing those long phrases Ella delivered with ease. I work out, I vocalize to stay vocally accurate and strong. I rest also because a voice singing 24 songs and doing many monologues needs rest. I simply live to do this show. It's a very selfish act because if I do it right I get to have a lot of fun on stage!

I played here in Nashville doing *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* and the audiences loved the show. Ralph Maccio played Finch and I was Ms. Jones, the bosses' secretary. I know that

Nashville is a music lover's town, and everyone who loves music loves Ella. I can't wait to share this fantastic woman's story with the audiences here and to make all those people happy.

You originated this role and have been involved in this production for a few years now. What's the biggest lesson you've drawn from this experience?

The lesson that truly wonderful music and a revealing story bring all of us great joy. No matter where we come from or how old we are or how much we have or don't have we are always touched. We are all captivated by human experience told in an honest and open way. People have responded to Ella this way and we are all very gratified to witness it time and time again. I have to thank Rob Ruggiero for his vision, and great directing and an unbelievable artist team, not to mention a fabulous cast of musicians who are actors as well.

Ticket prices range from \$35 to \$60 and are available at the TPAC box office. Order online by visiting tpac.org or by calling 615-782-4040. Group orders of 20 or more may be placed by calling 615-782-4060.