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Theater

Louise Pitre on her Carnegie Hall debut

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September 23, 2009 By Elisabeth Vincentelli

Though her performance as Donna Sheridan earned her a Tony nomination in 2002, Canadian singer Louise Pitre had never pictured herself singing Abba songs: "I still can't believe that 'Mamma Mia!' is the thing that took me to Broadway" she says now. "It's not something I would sing as a rule."

Tonight and tomorrow Pitre appears in the concert version of "Kristina" at Carnegie Hall; the show is also by Abba's Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, but it shares more with their "Chess."

Louise Pitre: Even when I got the role in "Mamma Mia!," to me Benny and Björn were the composers of "Chess." I love that score so, so much. It doesn't get any better than that to me. In my dreams I do it all the time! I was familiar with the score of "Kristina" because when Benny came to see us the first time we did "Mamma Mia!" with the band in Toronto, he was so happy that he went home and sent us all the three-CD set of "Kristina." So when he asked me to do it, I checked the keys on the recording and said yes, you bet I want to do it.

How does the concert version differ from the full staging?

LP: They will project some script, sort of like "Star Wars." Before my character comes in the story, a couple of people sing some narrative bits, but after that Ulrika is the narrator. They had to cut so the narration fills in the blanks.

Your character, Ulrika, starts off as the local prostitute in Sweden then reinvents herself as a minister's wife in America.

LP: She finds love late in life, which interestingly enough is my story too. I was 40 when I met my husband.

But as far as I know you weren't the town's prostitute.

No! [*laughs*] But I know what it is to find something late in life. Isn't it great for her to have a clean slate?

Which of your songs do you particularly like?

I like the first one, "Never." It's wonderful, very dramatic. It's a slow tempo and I love the feel of it. We lowered it so it's a bit darker. I found that on the recording Ulrika and Kristina's voices are a bit similar but it's not the case now. I love the duet that they do together too, it's so sweet.

Do you think fans of "Mamma Mia!" will enjoy this show?

I think they'll be surprised if they only know "Mamma Mia!" even if both shows follow women through their journey. But yeah, they'll be surprised by the score, though it's also very accessible. It's not Sondheim or "The Light in the Piazza" -- the kind of score that's been written these past few years.

What are your dream roles?

Florence in "Chess," Mama Rose in "Gypsy," Mame. Why not? I love that show, why is it never done? "Applause" -- I did that years ago but now I could really do that role. The score is maybe dated a bit but it's fantastic. Right after "Kristina" I'm doing "Toxic Avenger" in Toronto. What can I say: John Rando. I'm learning both scores at the same time [*laughs*].

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Elisabeth Vincentelli joined the New York Post as theater critic in February 2009. She previously was arts and entertainment editor at Time Out New York. In the past she's also contributed to publications such as The New York Times, The Village Voice, The Los Angeles Times, Entertainment Weekly, Rolling Stone, The Believer, Slate and Salon. She lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

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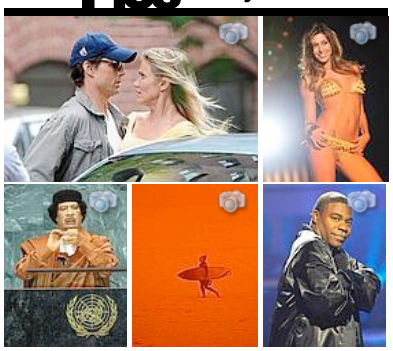

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