



Adventures in the Endless Pursuit of Entertainment

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2015

Nika Leoni - Soprano and Composer



Last week I went to Empire Opera for the first time, specifically to see **Nika Leoni**. I had been looking for a chance to hear her again, ever since I heard her in "Pushkin's Little Tragedies" in 2009.

That's a long time to remember such a voice, but her voice is that memorable.

Empire Opera, a New York company founded in 2007, hosted this Composers Concert, i.e. an evening of Songs by

Singers, at the Advent Lutheran Church on Broadway. It was an enjoyable evening, especially in that it was only blocks from my home. I was impressed by the variety of talent and performance.

For this evening, Nika Leoni was accompanied on both of her pieces by pianist Violetta Zabbi.

Nika's performance on this particular evening was especially thrilling, singing her own compositions. In the first act, she performed a selection from her song cycle *Love Songs*, with text from the poetry of Sara Teasdale. This short set was lovely and I found myself wanting more. Five of the six songs were performed coquettishly and all were quite pleasing. These poems/songs are teasing and playful, however, my favorite of this piece was *To-Night*, a departure in that is a song of passion and want, which Nika sang powerfully.

Nika's second work of the Composers Concert was *Euridice Suite*, for

ABOUT ME



SARAH B. ROBERTS

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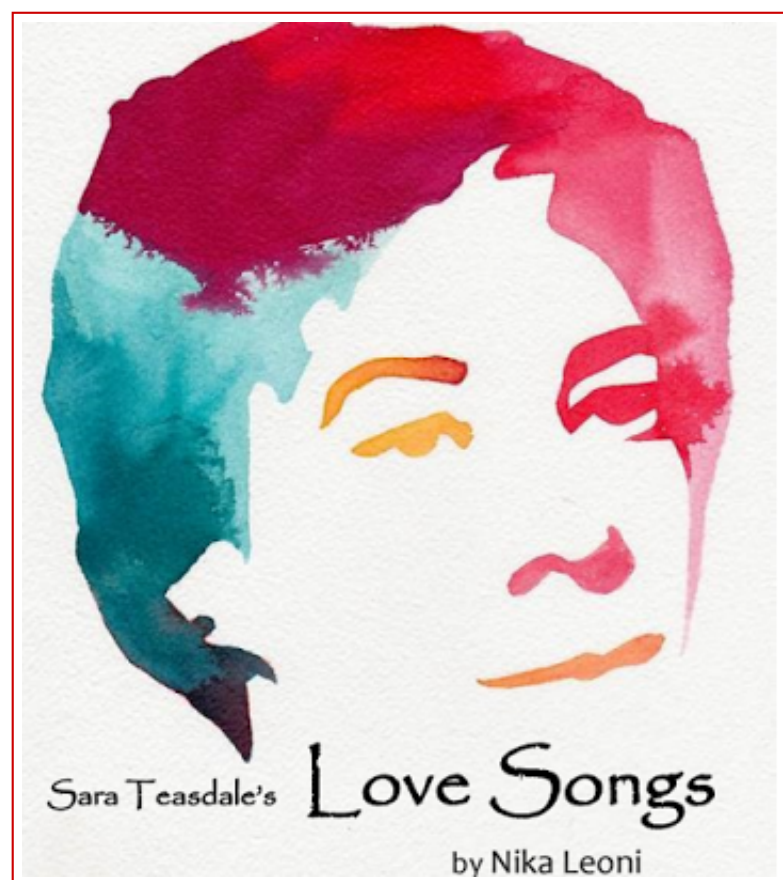
"The theatre can do things that you can't legislate, or preach, or make laws about. The theatre can do this thing of getting in, into your heart."
~George Hearn, *Words and Music* by **Jerry Herman**

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which she co-wrote text and score. Scene I lyrics are by Marilena Ruscica and Scene II lyrics are by Nika. Here, they took the story of Orpheus but told it from Eurydice's perspective. It's an interesting and welcoming take on a familiar story. The music has a sound of mystery and runs the gamut of feelings which Eurydice must have been experiencing during her time in Hades and separation from her husband. It's dramatically beautiful while conveying confusion, love and finally acceptance. Again, Nika is so vocally expressive and took me on the journey with her and honestly I found myself quite lost between her voice and her telling of the story.

Nika Leoni's talent is extraordinary. Her lower tones are so velvety rich that I almost believed her to be a mezzo, but she belies that with her gorgeously full upper register. There's a lovely brightness in the voice as well as deepness. She exudes a calm and elegant presence, while vocally she expresses emotion with great aplomb and maturity. It's an exciting combination and voice I hope to hear again and again in the future.



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I Love to Travel, Don't You?

One of the fun things that comes with having a full-time job is time off. Instead of staying at home, reading, curling up with my cat and crying while listening to indie folk records, I decided to actually travel. I finally had the means to do so and after years of being the person who [...]

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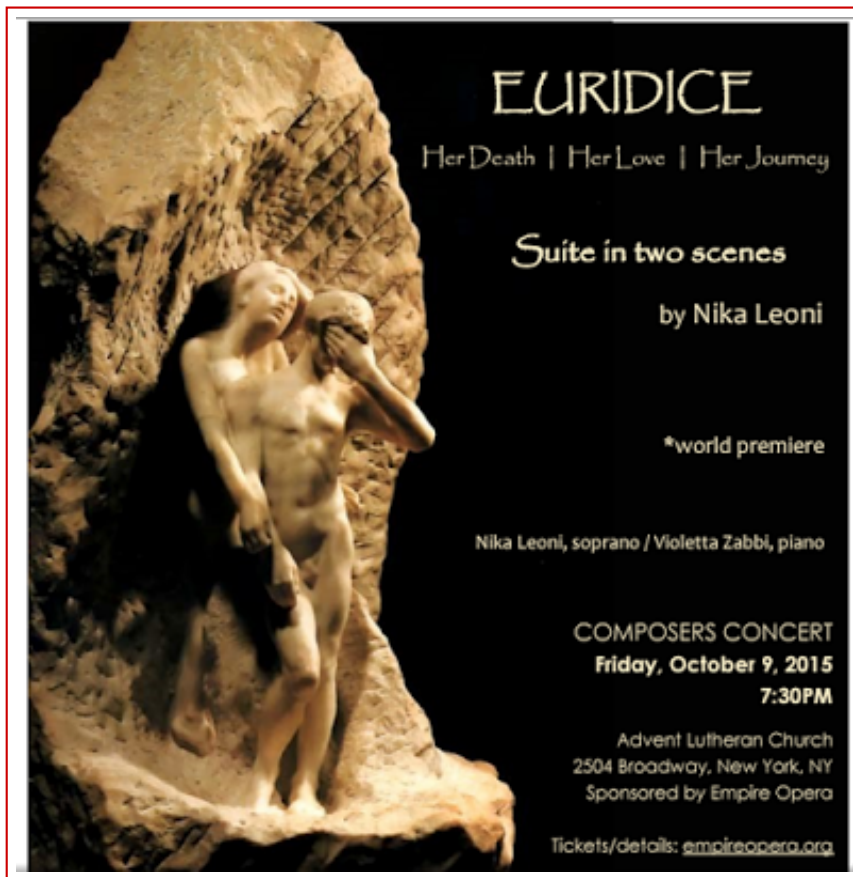
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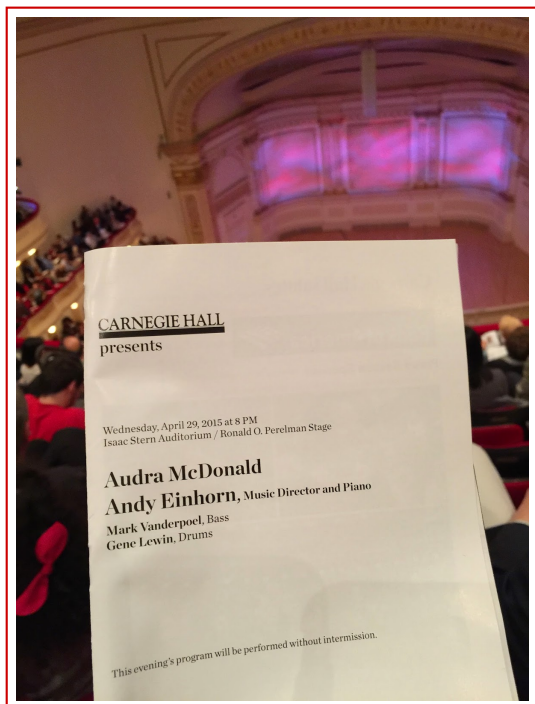
FRIDAY, MAY 01, 2015

Audra McDonald, Your Tardiness Is Excused

We were supposed to see Audra McDonald at Carnegie Hall on December 12, 2014. Unfortunately, she postponed due to a work conflict. We finally saw her on Wednesday night, April 29, 2015. She was just a little late; but, for the show she gave us, she is certainly excused for her tardiness!

I have seen Audra in concert (mostly at Carnegie Hall!) and on Broadway here in New York many times now and I am never, ever disappointed. In fact, I'm usually thrilled. Her performance this week was definitely thrilling. She gave us almost songs from the musical theatre, both from the golden age of Broadway and modern musicals, and with just a couple of standards thrown in for a treat.

I love Audra - her stage presence is majestic yet humble. She says what's on her mind and she shares hilarious anecdotes (i.e. I was the



darkest Mother Abbess ever; Chipotle is my office; "Audra McDonald dropped the F Bomb in Carnegie Hall") .

She called this concert "Songs from My Living Room." She chose songs that she great up listening to as well as shouting out to the ladies who inspired her: Barbara Cook. Chita Rivera, Betty Buckley, Patti LuPone, Liza Minnelli. She especially sang in honor of Chita

Rivera and Barbara Cook and said she hoped she would have a Broadway career like they have had. I *think* she'll do okay in that deparatment (6 Tonys and counting and she's only 44 years old).

Seeing her in concert is like just hanging out with her friends, until she opens her mouth and out pours that huge, glorious, warm mezzo sound, not mention when she occassionally throws in some soprano notes and your eyes want to roll back in your head.

Her thrilling set list:

"Sing Happy" from *Flora, the Red Menace* by Kander & Ebb
 "Mister Snow" from *Carousel* by Rodgers & Hammerstein (Audra's first Tony Award!)
 "Chief Cook and Bottle Washer" from *The Rink* by Kander & Ebb
 "My Buddy" by Walter Donaldson and Gus Kahn
 "Let's Not Talk About Love" from *Let's Face It* by Cole Porter (additional silly lyrics personalized for Audra by Dachslager)
 "No One Else" from *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812* by Dave Malloy
 "Proud Lady" from *The Baker's Wife* by Shephen Schwartz (he especially revised lyrics for Audra)
 "It Was Never You" from *Knickerbocker Holiday* by Kurt Weill
 "Vanilla Ice Cream" from *She Loves Me* by Bock and Harnick
 "Tale of Otter and Bear" by Shaina Taub
 "Maybe This Time" from *Cabaret* by Kander & Ebb
 "How Could I Know" from *The Secret Garden* by Marsha Norman and

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Lucy Simon (Audra's Broadway debut!)

"Facebook Song" by Katie Miller-Heidke (who happens to be Australian opera singer!)

"When I'm Gonna Go Back Home" from *The Scottsboro Boys* by Kander & Ebb

"Writing on the Wall" from *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* by Rupert Holmes

"Make Someone Happy" from *Do Re Mi* by Styne, Comden and Green

"Rainbow High" from *Evita!* by Andrew Lloyd Webber

"Climb Ev'ry Mountain" from *The Sound of Music* by Rodgers and Hammerstein

"Over the Rainbow" by Harold Arlen and E.Y. Yarburt

Sweet bonus: Audra on Buzz Feed. It's brilliant.

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/ninamohan/audra-is-flawless#.lk13A9J8J>

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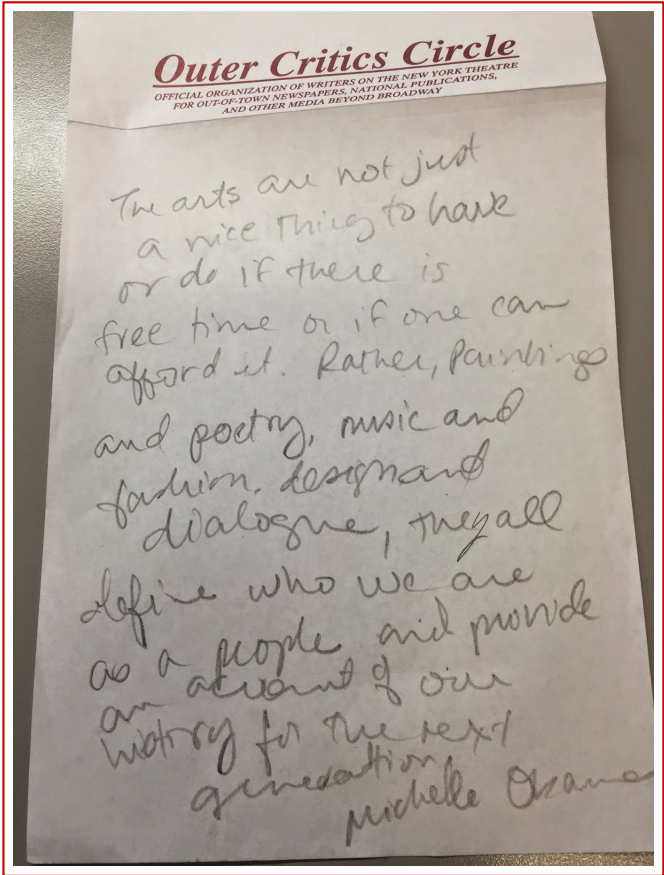
TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 2015

The arts are not

I found this note in a stack of papers in an old file folder recently. I don't know the why, when, or where of this quote from Michelle Obama, but it's been sitting on my typing stand and I think it's time to


share it.

"The Arts are not just a nice thing to have or do if there is free time or if one can afford it. Rather, paintings and poetry, music and fashion, design and dialogue, they all define who we are as a people and provide an account of our history for the next generation."
Michelle Obama



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LABELS: ARTS, MICHELLE OBAMA, QUOTE OF THE DAY

TUESDAY, MARCH 31, 2015

The Other Mozart at the Player's Theatre





photo: www.anthonycollins.nyc

On Saturday night, I was immersed in the experience of **THE OTHER MOZART**. It's a one-woman drama about Maria Anna Mozart and is a theatrical experience not to be missed.

Although I've always thought that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was my favorite composer, I never realized that he had sister, much less that she was as much the progeny that he was. I was nothing less than transported in to her world by **Sara Florence Fellini** as she sensitively and beautifully performed the monodrama.

Maria Anna Mozart, known as Nannerl, was almost five, and longing to play music, when her brother Wolfgang Amadeus was born. At age 7, she was finally taught the harpsichord by their father.

Wolfgang's insane musical brilliance and young death is simply a part of our culture, but the story that unfolds about his sister is one that is profoundly sad although enlightening. As she tells her own story we see her mature but resign herself to her fate as a product of the 18th century. It's maddening to realize the waste of her own brilliant musical talent merely because it was not proper in juxtaposition to the expectations that she fulfill the duties of wife, housekeeper and mother.

As a child, Nannerl traveled with her father and brother sometimes performing on her own and then as sort of the opening act for Wolfgang at royal courts all over Europe. Through her recounting, lines taken from her actual letters to her family, we are taken into the 18th century and into the age of the Enlightenment as we see it through her excited eyes and words. Sadly, as she matured, it was decided for her by her father that she should return to a rather lonely existence in

Salzburg to prepare for marriage and children. She was allowed to continue practicing and even wrote her own compositions, although they were never published or possibly heard by the public. Her life was confined in poverty and circumstances until she finally was eventually married to a rather cruel widower, at age 33, and had her own children, all of it portrayed as rather prison like in the play, as her freedom of music was stripped away into a rural, cold life that was completely opposite of the life she had known as a child traveling and performing in the royal courts of Europe.

Maria Anna Mozart's legacy may be that she preserved all of correspondence and manuscripts of her brother, ensuring that Wolfgang was not lost to us.

THE OTHER MOZART is by Sylvia Milo, who shares the performance schedule with Sara Florence Fellini when she steps into the role every other Saturday. The production of THE OTHER MOZART is stunning. Performed in the 50 seat black box of Steve & Marie Sgouros Theatre on the 3rd floor at the Players, the experience is immersive in light, by Joshua Rose and design by Anna Sroka.

The set is a 18-foot dress, designed by Magdalena Dabrowska from the National Theater of Poland, that almost takes on a life of its own. The actress is dressed in pretty period undergarments with corset and the donning of the dress, i.e., set is an culmination of the evening. Even the hair design, by Courtney Bednarowski, lends to the feel of the period. The choreographer is Janice Orlandi who has designed the movement on and within that dress, sometimes manic, sometimes childlike, sometimes defeated, finally accepting.

The sound, which is rather magical, is provided by Nathan Davis and Phyllis Chen (of Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival and the International Contemporary Ensemble) using clavichords, music boxes, bells, teacups, and fans. All under the direction of Isaac Byrne, the light, sound, and even scent, combined with the emotional fervor and performance by Sara, transport into Nannerl's world and life.

Sara Florence Fellini very believably takes us through Nannerl's life from childhood to late in life with a lithe, witty and sometimes manic performance. She's ethereal at times and never anything less than breathtaking.

THE OTHER MOZART is a thrilling and sensual evening of theatre. My senses were completely on edge by the final moments; I wanted it to end yet I wanted, almost needed, to see it all over again. I feel almost

overwhelmed to know about his sister now and I need to know more.

THE OTHER MOZART runs until April 25th at the Player's Theatre at 115 MacDougal Street. Tickets are available online via **Ovationtix** or call 866-811-4111. When you go, use the one glass door that is marked 115 on the doorframe. It's rather inconspicuous and there isn't really a box office (I've seen many productions in this space and theatre goers are always ridiculously confused at this location). Take the stairs up to the third floor. Tickets are available at the door, including reduced priced student tickets, however, all seats on Saturday night appeared to be filled.

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LABELS: **MOZART**, **OFF-OFF BROADWAY**, **PLAYER'S THEATRE**, **THE OTHER MOZART**

FRIDAY, MARCH 27, 2015

Opera Singers, Wagner + Girl Pop = Girl Power Perfection

Everything about this is awesome and full of girl power - mezzos and sopranos Ruby Hughes, Clara Mouriz, Charlotte Trepess, Elizabeth Watts and Kitty Whately, with the ladies of the BBC Philharmonic and The Halle conducted by Sian Edwards, and with special guests -- violinist Tasmin Little and pianist Kathryn Stott. The entire orchestra is female!

BBC Radio 3's ultimate musical battle - THE GIRLS



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LABELS: KITTY WHATELY, LITTLE MIX, OPERA, WAGNER

MONDAY, MARCH 02, 2015

Rasheeda Speaking at the New Group



On February 21st, I saw the matinee of the New Group's production

Rasheeda Speaking.

It stars Tonya Pinkins, Dianne Wiest, Patricia Connolly and Darren Goldstein. Joel Drake Johnson's new play is under the direction of Cynthia Nixon, making her directorial debut.

Wow! What an afternoon. Aside from it conjuring all sorts of office PTSD for me, I found the play to be

uncomfortable and quite terrifying, although quite hilarious. It's the best and worst kind of comedy - the one that punches you in the stomach and makes you think about its message for maybe forever...and hopefully it reached out and changed a few minds. The story is set in a doctor's office. The main characters are two administrative assistants who seem to be friends and amiable co-workers until their boss stirs things up by promoting the older white one in order to get rid of the less experienced black one. Nobody will say what they really mean and it's an itchy dance around racism and prejudices, both perceived and very real.

I felt so challenged as a white person in the midst of some very diverse audience demographics. I was sitting beside an older white woman and the two of us were sandwiched between black women. The audience was fairly mixed racially, although I was among the few younger seat fillers. All of the black women in our row were ready for Tonya Pinkins to take them to church, as it were. They were having a great time! Meanwhile, I felt nervous on a number of levels. There are office politics, scary co-workers and manipulation flying around the

room. The whole kettle threatening to boil over at any minute and it has everybody on edge. Each of the characters (and probably every last audience member) had some prejudice whether they admitted it, much less realized it.

The play was superbly acted, which should not surprise anybody considering the pedigree of its actors and director (Tonys, Emmys, Oscar, etc galore). As usual, I had a hard time keeping my eyes off Tonya Pinkins. She's a magnet, cool and gorgeous and so very, very real in every movement. Dianne Wiest is sheer perfection at playing meek and unsure of herself and falls apart in front of the audience's eyes. Darren Goldstein is smarmy and disgusting and quite perfect as the manipulative, upper middle class white doctor (ugh, my bosses were not doctors, but lawyers and I could see his type coming a mile away). Patricia Connolly is wonderfully oblivious as the little old lady patient - she has no idea that she's saying anything wrong at all and quite outrageously threatens to steal the whole show.

Rasheeda Speaking is on until March 22nd produced by The New Group at The Pershing Square Signature Center in the The Romulus Linney Courtyard Theatre, 480 West 42nd Street. I used **Broadwaybox** for discounted tickets.

Interviews with the cast of *Rasheeda Speaking*



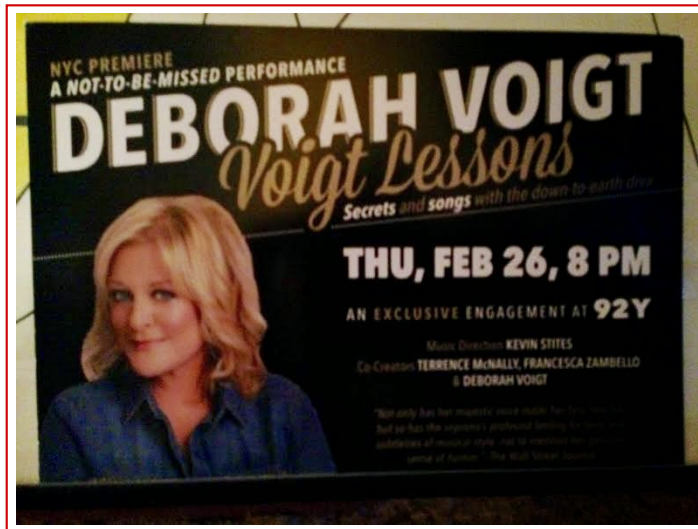
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LABELS: DIANNE WIEST, OFF-BROADWAY, THE NEW GROUP, TONYA PINKINS

SUNDAY, MARCH 01, 2015

Debbie Voigt: Voigt Lessons at 92Y



Last week **Debbie Voigt** presented the new York City premier of her one woman show "Voigt Lessons" at the 92nd Street Y last

Thursday night. And girl, there were lessons to be learned.

Deborah Voigt is one of the greatest dramatic sopranos of modern times. I have seen her sing opera and lieder at the Met Opera and Carnegie Hall. I saw her in my first Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde* and later in my first Ring Cycle, *Götterdämmerung* and *Siegfried* and earlier, in two Richard Strauss operas, *Elektra* and *Die ägyptische Helena*. At Carnegie, I heard her sing Strauss' *Last Four Songs* with the Met Opera and in her own lieder recital. Hearing her was thrilling, indeed.

Aside from loving her singing, Debbie is a personal heroine of mine: she has shared her journey of conquering her compulsive overeating and addiction, weight issues, and other personal hurdles. She published her memoirs, **Call Me Debbie: True Confessions of a Down-To-Earth Diva**, in January.

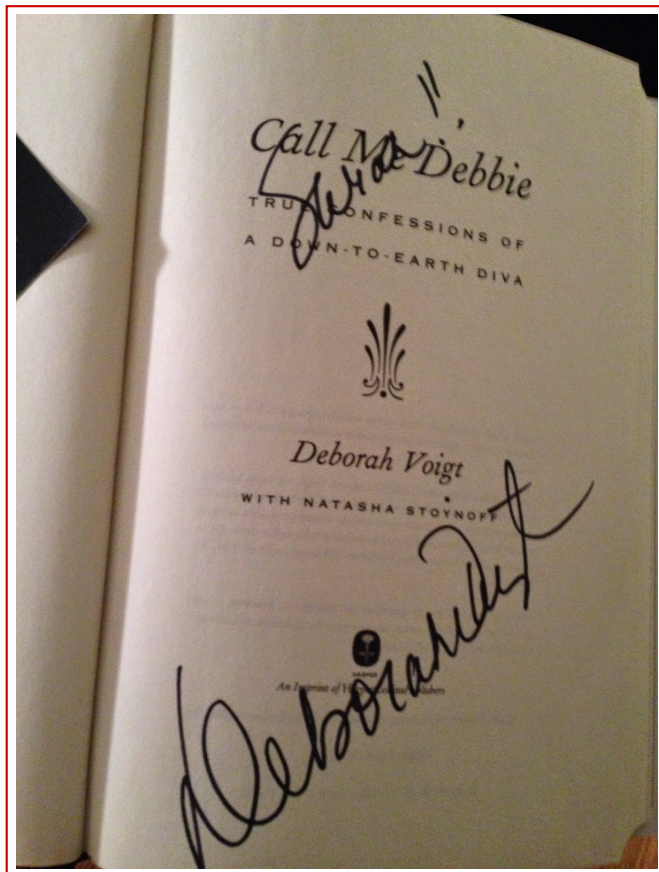
Voigt Lessons, a lovely evening of song and story, is a beautiful companion to her published memoirs. The piece was created by Deborah Voigt, Terrence McNally (Tony award winning playwright and book writer) and opera and theatre director Francesca Zambello. Richard Jay-Alexander staged the evening. Debbie was accompanied on piano by her music director, Kevin Stites.

Debbie talked of learning to sing in the choir as a little girl in church to her time in high school musical theatre to learning to sing opera on the largest stages in the world. She punctuated her very personal history by sharing some of her favorite songs from The Carpenters, musical theatre, old hymns and even Strauss and Brahms lieder. She teased us with the opening bars to the second act of *Tannhäuser*. She especially

wowed us with her rendition of the tenor aria *Nessun Dorma*. She even thru in a 'Ho-jo-to-ho'! She closed the evening with the old gospel, *His Eye is on the Sparrow*.

She is warm, funny and beautiful. She worked from a script for the evening, but at times spontaneously and to our great delight, went off book from time to time bring even greater joy to the evening. Debbie did say shes still has some of the great roles in her, for which I cheered as loud as I could: Kostelnička (*Jenufa*), Ortrud (*Lohengrin*), Dolly (*Hello Dolly!*) and *Mame* (Hell Yes!). This was an evening of range - range of music and emotion - and I have no doubt she's up to any and all of these roles.

I found the evening to be quite cathartic. I found myself in tears from the honest emotion and stories she shared. I'm very grateful that she has been brave enough to own up and tell us all about all of this. It's not easy. As a woman who has struggled with compulsive overeating for as long as I can remember, I identify with her story and I know it's the hardest thing to work on much less talk about. Everything and anything is easy compared to this, at least for me. After the concert, I waited in line to have her sign my copy of her book and I'm so glad I did. I felt a boost to continue working on my goals just being able to tell her thanks for being so brave. Thanks very much indeed, Debbie.



Bonus:
Because it's
adorable and
because my pal
Jesse North is
also in this
video:



Debbie Voigt with Kevin Stites, photo by Richard Termine

Opera Star Deborah Voigt Goes for High Notes in I



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John & Jen at Keen Company

I was so delighted to see **Keen Company's** new production of *John & Jen* on Friday night. The two-hander musical stars **Kate Baldwin** and newcomer Conor Ryan.

It is a sweet, charming, funny, poignant musical with a great score and clever lyrics by Andrew Lippa and Tom Greenwald. Orchestrations are by another Broadway composer, Jason Robert Brown.



I loved the inventive music - from fun and very catchy to heart-string pulling.

The production is slight, leaving the actors to convey all of the changing times with their craft and they manage it very well. Both actors have to play children to young adults, little brother and big sister in the first act and son and mother in the second act. It's a beautiful coming of age story set during the 1960s

into the 1980s.

Conor is adorable at all times. He does funny very well and his smile is contagious. He had me laughing so much with his antics, which seems effortless. He's got a great voice too. I can't wait to see more of him.

As for Kate, she never disappoints me. Seeing her in the tiny space at The Clurman in Theatre Row is a magical experience. The opportunity to see her on this stage is not to be missed - she's transcendent. Her character - big sister then mother - ages from 13 to late 30s. Her transition is seamless and breathtaking. She played all of the emotions so well and had me on the edge of my seat. I really think there's nothing she can't do.


John & Jen plays until April 4th and I really think I will have to revisit this one. Tickets are available at the Theatre Row box office at 410 West 42nd Street (btw 9th and 10th) or via Telecharge. I used a **Broadwaybox** discount for \$50 tickets.

This is Keen Company's 20th Anniversary Production and to that they deserve many happy returns. I have seen so many of their productions over the years and am never disappointed. They offer a satisfying variety of drama and comedy, plays and musicals (their production of *Marry Me A Little* with Lauren Molina and Jason Tam is one of my favorite things ever and they also gave me a chance to see the incomparable Kathleen Chalfant in *Painting Churches*).

Kate Baldwin and Conor Ryan Preview Revival of J



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