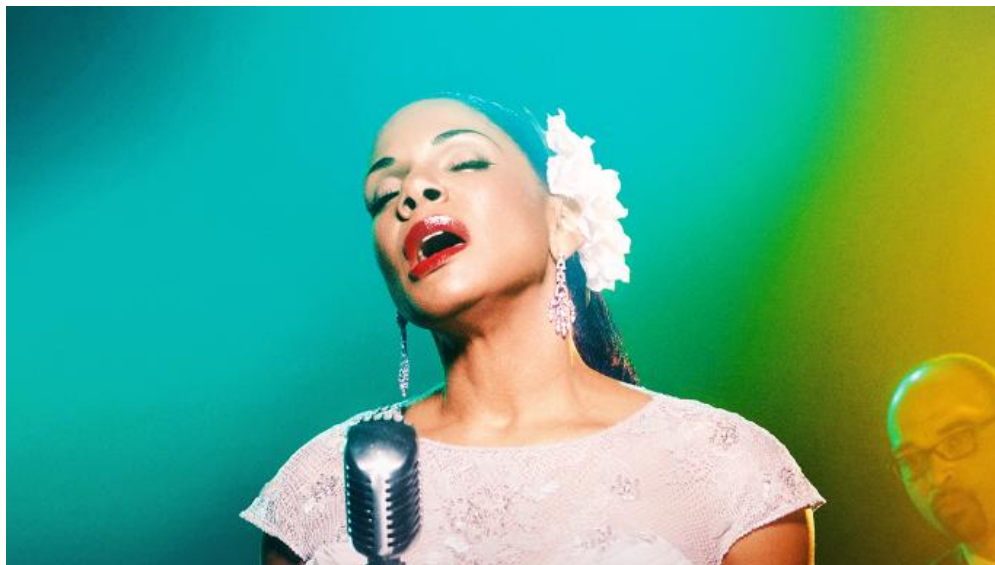


Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill star: 'I understand Billie Holiday's turmoil'

Broadway superstar Audra McDonald talks about her journey to the West End in the role that won her a sixth Tony award

Debra Craine

June 3 2017, 12:01am, The Times



Audra McDonald as Billie Holiday in Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill
EVGENIA ELISEEVA



Share



Save

It's the kind of experience you long for in the theatre, and it's incredibly rare. Ten years ago I saw a Broadway revival of *110 in*

Our site uses cookies. By continuing to use our site you are agreeing to our [cookies policy](#).

ACCEPT AND CLOSE

McDonald brought such passion to the show's love-starved "old maid" that you could feel the character's loneliness transport across the proscenium arch and into our psyches.



McDonald's arrival on the West End was delayed when she became pregnant
MICHAEL LECKIE

McDonald is Broadway royalty. A singer who acts like a dream and an actress who sings like a diva, she has a New York stage career festooned with awards. With six Tonys on her shelf she has more performance wins than any other actor and is the only person to win all four acting categories. She is also an acclaimed concert and recording artist (she has two Grammys), played Dr Naomi Bennett in the TV series *Private Practice* and was Madame Garderobe in Disney's recent live-action remake of *Beauty and the Beast*. On this side of the Pond I will never forget her sensational performance in Leonard Bernstein's *Wonderful Town* at the Proms in 1999 or her chatty nights at the Leicester Square Theatre, where the combination of her lyric soprano and genial good humour were a charming knockout punch.

one of McDonald's long-held ambitions will be realised. "I have always been desperate to play the West End, so this is a dream come true," she says. She won her record-breaking sixth Tony for her performance in this one-woman show about the jazz great Billie Holiday. She had planned to bring *Lady Day* to London last summer, but the run was abruptly postponed when McDonald became pregnant. With typical playfulness, McDonald, who was at the time dancing nightly on Broadway in *Shuffle Along*, tweeted: "Who knew that tap dancing during perimenopause could lead 2 pregnancy?" Last October Sally was born.

“

All my life I have struggled with depression. When I was 21 I tried to kill myself

McDonald, a mother for the second time at 46, certainly looks great on it. When we meet at a Covent Garden hotel she has brought baby Sally along and even the latter's insistent gurgling can't detract from her mother's charisma, a distinctive blend of graciousness and glamour.

"Sally is an absolute miracle," the actress says. "She's not a wimpy baby; she's so full of life." McDonald also has a 16-year-old daughter by her first husband and two stepsons with her second husband, the Broadway star Will Swenson (Sally's

So is the theatre, a vocation that couldn't be better showcased than in her portrayal of the singer known as Lady Day. The play, written by Lanie Robertson and directed by Lonny Price, captures one of the last concerts Holiday gave, in a small bar in Philadelphia just months before her death in 1959. It illustrates the singer's life using the songs that made her famous, including *God Bless the Child*, *What a Little Moonlight Can Do*, *Strange Fruit* and *Taint Nobody's Biz-ness If I Do*. For McDonald the role is a tour de force, musically and emotionally.

“

I put on the perfume she wore. I put gin behind my ears so I smell like she smelt

Holiday's well-documented life was a horror show. An African-American born into poverty in Philadelphia in 1915, she endured a childhood blighted by rape and prostitution, while her adult years were wrecked by heroin addiction, abusive men and institutionalised racism. "She was a big star, she sold out concerts, but she still had to go to the other side of town to some rat-infested motel afterwards because she couldn't stay in the same hotel as Artie Shaw — because he was white and she was black."

At the age of 44, Holiday died, hounded by the FBI for drug offences and handcuffed to a hospital bed. "She was so ill, she had really swollen ankles from all the drink, and a distended stomach," McDonald says. "She had no money, she wasn't eating well and she didn't have much of a will to live. I think when they came into her hospital and arrested her she just gave up. It's not a shock that she died when she did."

was born in West Berlin, where her father was stationed with the US army, but was raised in Fresno, California, where she joined a junior theatre troupe. She was sent there by her mother, who was anxious to find an outlet for her daughter's hyperactivity. "As a kid, being on stage was where I felt the most comfortable, the most confident, where I felt the most like me."

Yet McDonald also had a fantastic singing voice and it was her musical talent that put her into the opera programme at the Juilliard School in New York. "I always knew I wanted to be a Broadway star so what was I doing studying all this classical music? Turns out I had to discover my classical voice, discover the rest of my voice. It was the right thing to do at the time, but you could not have convinced me of that then. All I wanted to do was get to Broadway."

Her big break (and her first Tony award) came when Nicholas Hytner cast her as Carrie in his 1994 New York revival of *Carousel*. It was a casting that ruffled more than a few feathers because Carrie is traditionally played by a white actress, but as she has proved time and again McDonald defies racial stereotyping. "If I have something to say about a role, if I can get into the truth of that character, that's all I'm looking for. I don't want to be put in a box."

Looking at McDonald, the very picture of health and happiness, is to wonder how she finds a way into Holiday's deeply disturbing and damaged character, but she surprises me with her answer. "I have struggled with depression all of my life. When I was 21 I tried to kill myself when I was at Juilliard and I was in a mental hospital in New York City for a month. So I have an inner turmoil that I always have to deal with and in that sense I do understand some of Billie's inner turmoil. I haven't been raped, I wasn't a prostitute, but I have felt that life wasn't



Audra McDonald: "Holiday was true to who she was as an artist"

EVGENIA ELISEEVA

McDonald's Juilliard-trained, operatically inclined voice is a much cleaner instrument than Holiday's free-range jazz voice, so for *Lady Day* the actress first had to "dirty up" her vocal style. "It took a long time to find Billie's voice," she says. "I listened to tons of recordings of her and interviews she gave and I realised that she had a very specific way of speaking that sounded a lot like my grandmother. I used to imitate my grandmother when I was kid, so I came at Holiday through my grandmother.

"Holiday's voice was spectacular because she wasn't trying to sound like anybody else," McDonald says. "So many people wanted her to sound a different way, to sing more upbeat tunes, but she was true to who she was as an artist. She worked with what she had to get out what she needed to emotionally. She played her voice like an instrument, bending words or time and always ending up right in the pocket of where she needed to be."

much earlier than for any other show,” McDonald says. “And I just slowly start to put her on. I listen to her music, to her speaking, I put on the perfume she wore. I put gin behind my ears, underneath my nose, and add a touch to my tongue, so I can smell like she smelt. From the time I hit the theatre to the time I leave I’m Billie, but the moment the show ends it’s time to let her go. To take her home with me would be detrimental.”

I said earlier that this was a one-woman show, but that’s not exactly true. McDonald has to perform with a canine co-star, for Holiday was famously a dog lover and it was rare to see her without a pooch under her arm. McDonald is also a fan — she has two very big dogs running around her home in Westchester County, just north of New York City — but it’s imperative that she is happy with the chihuahua that will share her stage.

“I have to have chemistry with the dog because we have to look like we are joined at the hip. And even with a well-trained dog you have to put in the time. Part of my preparation every night is spending time with the dog: feeding her, playing with her. I will sing and talk to her as Billie. This has to happen on a nightly basis because the relationship has to be constantly reinforced.”

McDonald’s relationship with her human audience seems so naturally intimate and easygoing. It’s one of her strengths as a performer, but that too was hard-won. “I used to have problems passing out during concerts because I was feeling so overwhelmed and nervous,” she says. “I have an overactive parasympathetic system, which causes my body to shut down completely when stressed. I had to learn how to deal with that. I had to mentally and emotionally understand that the audience is not there for your execution — they want you to succeed. Once I started to see the audience as my friend and not my enemy I stopped passing out and I started opening up.”



Share

Save

Related links

Start spreading the news — the must-see shows on Broadway

Ann Treneman

Theatre lurks everywhere in New York, not just on Broadway. There I was, taking an hour off from...

April 28 2017

DANCE

An American in Paris is heading our way

Debra Craine

We all love to dream as children, but how often do those dreams come true as spectacularly, as...

March 11 2017

Lin-Manuel Miranda: the man behind a musical phenomenon

Rachel Syme

If you ever find yourself in a position to sit down with Lin-Manuel Miranda, know this: you never...

June 11 2016

Saliha Mahmood Ahmed on the art of home cooking

The MasterChef winner says preparation is the key to eating well

SPONSORED

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

1 comment


+ Follow
Post comment

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended

Tom Bloomfield Jun 3, 2017

Audra McDonald is a terrific singer and well worth listening to as herself.

2
Recommend
Reply



▲ BACK TO TOP

GET IN TOUCH

Contact us

Help

The Times Editorial Complaints

The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints

Place an announcement

Classified advertising

Display advertising

The Times corrections

The Sunday Times corrections

MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

The Times e-paper

The Sunday Times e-paper

Times Currency Services

The Sunday Times Wine Club

Encounters Dating

Times Print Gallery

Times Crossword Club

Sunday Times Driving

Times+

The Sunday Times Rich List

Parent Power

The Brief

© Times Newspapers Limited 2017.

Registered in England No. 894646.

Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

[Privacy & cookie policy](#)

[Syndication](#)

[Commissioning Terms](#)

[Terms and conditions](#)

