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DON'T SIT ALONE IN YOUR ROOM
— COME HEAR THE MUSIC PLAY!
LIZA MINNELLI AT 63
BRINGS THE MAGIC BACK

LIZA, *the legend*

By COLIN DABKOWSKI
NEWS ARTS WRITER

It is no secret that Liza Minnelli began her life in the spotlight.

On March 12, 1946, the star was born to Judy Garland and Vincente Minnelli, then a happily married Hollywood couple at the height of their celebrity. Liza's screen debut came at the age of 3, when she starred alongside her mother in the movie musical "In the Good Old Summertime."

By the time she was 17, Minnelli was beguiling audiences in New York and London, prompting jealousy from her mother and adulation from a small but growing legion of fans.

But the Liza Minnelli we know today — the energetic 63-year-old performer who divides her time between the tabloids and the stage — wasn't really born until 1965. That's when she starred in the

CONCERT PREVIEW

Liza Minnelli performs a holiday concert in the University at Buffalo Center for the Arts (UB North Campus, Amherst) at 8 p.m. next Sunday. Tickets are \$85 to \$125, with proceeds to benefit the Ronald McDonald House of Buffalo. For more information, call 645-2787 or visit www.ubcfa.org.

Broadway musical "Flora the Red Menace," by Broadway songwriting team John Kander and Fred Ebb.

"I feel like they invented me," Minnelli said of Kander and Ebb in a phone interview with The News, given between rehearsals in New York for her new show. Minnelli will perform a concert in

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Liza Minnelli's career is on the rebound after struggles with illness, addiction

MINNELLI • From F1

the University at Buffalo's Center for the Arts next Sunday, with part of the proceeds to benefit Ronald McDonald House.

By 1972, when Minnelli appeared in the famed televised concert "Liza With a Z" and the film version of "Cabaret," both conceived and largely written by Kander and Ebb, her name became synonymous with stardom.

If Minnelli's life belongs to the concert hall stage – and few would argue that it doesn't – her famous parents seem to matter less at this point than those two mild-mannered songwriters who penned "Liza With a Z" and the prophetic lyrics in the title song to "Cabaret." With that number, which extols a life that rotates on the axis of entertainment and shrugs off the perceived evils of pills, liquor and promiscuity, the duo essentially wrote into existence the modern Liza, with all her flair, flaws and mystique.

Asked what she owes to the songwriting team, Minnelli said, simply, "Everything. Literally everything."

She continued: "Fred was so brilliant, and John's music is inspiring. Everything they've ever written I'm crazy about."

Next Sunday's concert, the first act of which mirrors her recent Broadway show, "Liza's at the Palace," is sure to contain its share of Kander and Ebb tunes. The second half, Minnelli said, will be comprised of a brand-new assortment of songs. "I kind of talked to all my friends and said, 'What do you like to hear?'" she said.

The concert will mark Minnelli's second visit to the region in the last three years. A 2007 concert at the Niagara Fallsview Casino in Niagara Falls, Ont., preceded her successful Broadway run, which ended in January. Her career has been on a steady rebound since 2003, after she emerged from a bout with life-threatening viral encephalitis, a long struggle with addiction and the unfortunate tabloid spectacle that was her brief marriage to producer David Gest.

Minnelli's story of alternating sordidness and glamour has led many to view her as one of the last, grand, old-fashioned celebrities. Her most devoted fans view her as someone whose lineage is so strong, her struggles so public, her name so threaded through the annals of American culture that she has become a force far greater than the sum of its parts.

Locally, Minnelli certainly has plenty of acolytes.

Marc Sacco, a familiar face and voice on Buffalo's theater scene, recently performed a cabaret act titled "Marc With a C" at Buffalo United Artists, a show that took its inspiration and title song from Minnelli's seminal concert. Sacco rewrote the rapid-fire lyrics of Kander and Ebb's tune to fit his own name and disposition: "I'm Marc with a C / Not Marc with a K..." The reaction from the crowd – many a Minnelli follower among them – was overwhelming.

At 31, Sacco is too young to have lived through Minnelli's legendary performances. He allowed that he is not as devoted to the singer as many from prior generations, but called her performances in "Cabaret" and "Liza With a Z" inspiring.

"I really liked the format of it," Sacco said of the 1972 concert, which was released on DVD in 2006. "I liked that it was sort of this large-scale experience. Just to watch her energy was incredible."

Minnelli said she has no immediate plans to return to the Broadway stage in a musical. Her last appearance in a straight-ahead Broad-



LIZA MINNELLI
ON HER AUDIENCE:
"You know, we're really a family. I mean, when they come into that theater, we have two hours to really get to know each other. And that's so important to me."

Courtesy UB Center for the Arts

Liza on YouTube

As the YouTube celebrity archives go, they don't get much deeper than Liza Minnelli's. Clips of her performances pop up everywhere on the site and document her performance career from the early 1960s until today. We've sorted through the digital constellation of Minnelli clips to draw out some of the highlights:



"Hello Dolly" with Judy Garland at the London Palladium, 1964: Minnelli shares the stage with her mother in an energetic performance of the title tune from Jerry Herman's "Hello Dolly." bit.ly/lizajudy

"Mein Herr" from "Cabaret," 1972: This quintessential Minnelli performance comes with a triple treat: The slick choreography and filmmaking talents of Bob Fosse, the lyric and musical skill of John Kander and Fred Ebb, and, of course, a glimpse of Minnelli at the top of her game. bit.ly/meinherr

"Nowadays" on "Dinah's Place," mid-'70s: In a rare appearance with John Kander and Fred Ebb, who died in 2004, Minnelli performs a beloved song from "Chicago" on Dinah Shore's short-lived television show. Chita Rivera makes a surprise appearance. bit.ly/lizachita

"Copa Cabana" on "The Muppet Show," 1979: Minnelli mixes herself up in a Muppet dance party to this campily performed Barry Manilow classic. bit.ly/lizamuppet

"Losing My Mind" with the Pet Shop Boys, 1989: Stephen Sondheim's heartbreaking song, written for his musical "Follies," gets the electronica treatment in this totally unorthodox performance on the BBC. bit.ly/lizapetshop

Liza on Larry King, 2006: This heavily edited YouTube cut of a wide-ranging interview the singer gave on "Larry King Live" is an homage to Minnelli's legendary laugh. bit.ly/lizalaugh

way show was in 1997, when she played the title role in "Victor/Victoria." It's clear that Minnelli is far more comfortable in the concert setting, and not just because she gets that comfortable spot-lit glow all to herself.

"The wonderful thing about [being] in concert is you get to play so many different characters. That's what I look forward to," Minnelli said. "It's literally becoming the person who is singing, so you have to do back story, or I do. I treat it like a scene, and I try and make every song different."

Asked about favorite characters, Minnelli immediately brought up the song "If," by Jule Styne, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, in which a woman at the end of her rope murders her no-good rascal of a lover.

"At this time in my life, I find I am particularly drawn to songs about falling out of love," Minnelli told a concert audience earlier this year before launching into the piece. "The choice made by the woman in this next song, I find to be careful, reasonable, emotionally honest and profoundly admirable."

Away from the concert stage, Minnelli has had a habit of popping up in unexpected places that have introduced her to new generations of fans. These have included stints on "The Muppet Show" in the '70s and '80s, a guest appearance on the cult cable comedy "Arrested Development," and an upcoming appearance in "Sex and the City II," in which she dances to Beyoncé's hit "All the Single Ladies." "They were wonderful," Minnelli said of the "Sex and the

Liza, on the record

At 63, Liza Minnelli has contributed her share to pop culture legend. Unfortunately for collectors of media, the lion's share of her performances vanished as soon as they were delivered in Broadway theaters and concert halls the world over. But the Tony, Emmy, Grammy and Oscar award-winning performer has created a healthy collection of cast and concert recordings, films and other performances worth checking out. Here are some essentials for the novice Liza fan:

"Liza With a Z": Originally taped and aired on NBC in 1972, this concert, conceived and scripted by John Kander and Fred Ebb and choreographed and directed by Bob Fosse, is seen as one of the all-time great documents of musical theater talent.

"Cabaret": Bob Fosse's masterful film, starring Minnelli, Joel Grey and Michael York, is regarded as a revolutionary movie musical. It is filled with Fosse's quirky choreography and camera work and some of Kander and Ebb's more impressive songs.

"New York, New York": The title song of this 1977 film, directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Minnelli and Frank Sinatra, gave the singer one of her most beloved and frequently performed hits.

"Arrested Development," seasons 1-3: Minnelli's character, Lucille 2, is a love interest for the cult comedy series' bumbling mama's boy, Buster (Tony Hale). Her performance, though not exactly trumpeted by critics, gave the short-lived show a good deal of comic boost.

"Liza's Back," 2002: Produced by Minnelli's ex-husband David Gest, this album chronicles what the New York Times called "a blunt, old-fashioned music-hall extravaganza" that served as Minnelli's return to the stage early this decade.

"Liza's at the Palace," to be released February 2010: Minnelli's latest Broadway turn, which reviewer Stephen Holden called "a triumph of spirit over flesh," wrapped up in January at the Palace Theatre in New York City. This forthcoming DVD promises to capture the latter-day Minnelli gestalt on film.

City" cast. "We became quite close."

Minnelli, perhaps unsurprisingly, is a favorite subject of YouTube-dwellers, one of whom has memorialized her legendary laugh with a video compilation cut together from her 2006 interview with CNN's Larry King.

Does Minnelli have even the slightest idea of the infectious appeal of her laugh?

"No, I don't. Except I find a lot of things funny," the singer said, seeming genuinely surprised at the question and then issuing that unmistakable chuckle.

Minnelli, like many celebrities, speaks of her fans as family. But you get the sense that, whereas the likes of Usher or Taylor Swift make the comment hyperbolically, she genuinely means it.

In her 2007 concert in Niagara Falls, Ont., Minnelli told the audience, "The only people I'm ever married to are you." The crowd, already caught up in the throes of ecstasy, practically swooned itself unconscious. Such is Minnelli's appeal, her innate ability to move masses of people – who knows how? – to unbridled paroxysms of fandom.

Asked about the audience's reaction to that statement, Minnelli laughed her trademark laugh, a throaty projection that seemed to require the energy of her entire body, and said, "You know, we're really a family. I mean, when they come into that theater, we have two hours to really get to know each other. And that's so important to me."

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