

Pride Pipers

BLACK FEMALE PERFORMERS RAISE 'OUR VOICE' IN SONG

By Steve Bornfeld
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Their songs make "Our Voice" a shout of pride.

"As women African-American performers, I always wanted to do a show about who I am as a black person, where I come from, and celebrate those women who paved the way for me as a performer," says Nicole Pryor, creator of "Our Voice -- A Celebration of Black Women in Music," being staged Saturday at the West Las Vegas Library and Sunday at the Summerlin Library. "I created the show because I realize that I need to start making opportunities for myself and my friends that I know they deserve."



Nadine Roden – "Mamma Mia" Cast Member

"Our Voice" stars a quartet of black, Strip-credentialed singer/actresses: Pryor of "Phantom -- The Las Vegas Spectacular" and three "Mamma Mia!" cast members past and present: Joel (pronounced "Jo-L") Rene, Alana Simone and Nadine Roden.



A historical panorama in song, narration and photo projections, the concert stretches back to the slavery era (a call-and-response song called "Hoe Emma, Hoe"), through the first black opera ("Summertime" from "Porgy and Bess") and onto 20th- and 21st-century icons, including jazz stylists Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, Broadway stalwarts Stephanie Mills and Audra McDonald, and pop entertainers, among them Tina Turner, Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight, Whitney Houston and Beyoncé. "When we talk about Gladys or Aretha, back in the day they had to enter through the kitchen to perform," Pryor says. "We've just come so far."

But Rene adds that the show also will remind audiences that many still can't see the full scope of their abilities. "There is such a limited view of what African-American women can do that we want to show that, yes, we can actually do a lot of things," Rene says, though she acknowledges that homages to rap and hip-hop artists are missing from this show's lineup. "We took them out because we could not do them justice, nothing against the artists, it was more that we are not hip-hop artists ourselves."

The concerts are nominally linked to Kwanzaa, observed today through Thursday. "People think it's there to be part of Christmas, just because it falls during the holiday season, like it's Black Christmas or something," Pryor says. "Kwanzaa just celebrates who we are as a people."

Steeped in musical comedy/drama, the performers are particularly sensitive to the boundaries imposed on Broadway and in other theatrical venues. Rene, recently returned to Vegas from New York, says there are still too few black directors and producers, male or female, on the all-too-accurately dubbed Great White Way. "A lot of people say we just had 'The Color Purple,' but people need to realize we have lots of stories," Rene says. "We have happy stories as well as sad stories, we fall in love, succeed, reach goals."

Rene, Pryor adds, is passionate to play ingenue roles, which are nearly always unavailable to black actresses not already aboard the fame train. "She'd love to play Mary Poppins or the lead in 'Legally Blonde,' but they'd never cast her in that, because a lot of ingenues are cute white girls," says Pryor, noting that a few black female performers did shatter that barrier. "Toni Braxton played Belle in 'Beauty and the Beast,' which never would happen to a nonfamous black actress, though maybe I shouldn't say never, because that's the hope. Anybody can play Belle as long as they can perform it."

Another high-profile exception was Whoopi Goldberg, who defied both racial and gender traditions in 1997 when she took over as Pseudolus the slave, the lead in the Broadway revival of "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," in a role previously played by white male stars such as Zero Mostel, Phil Silvers and Nathan Lane.

Pryor's true jolt of performance inspiration came courtesy of Audra McDonald (TV's "Private Practice"), who's won four Tony Awards, one of them for "Ragtime" as Sarah, the tragic servant girl. "It was a black person in a musical, and that's all I wanted to be," says Pryor, who plays the character of the wardrobe mistress in Vegas' "Phantom." And though she jokingly refers to the production as "the clone show" -- "our Christines look very similar and all of our Raouls look alike," she says -- she also considers it "probably the most rare in that it has the most number of minorities."

That's a good step, but the ladies are looking forward to leaps.

"I know everyone thinks we're successful because we have Oprah, but we're bigger than Oprah," Rene says. "There's more to us, and I'm optimistic about the opportunities that are open. I'm doing more than my mother could ever do, than her mother could ever do, and it's only going to get better."

Toward that end this weekend, four women will proudly, loudly, raise "Our Voice."

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