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# American Visions

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## MILLENNIUM PORTRAIT



AUDRA  
McDONALD

# The Diva Next Door

by Sharon Fitzgerald

A

udra McDonald often knows in less than a minute whether or not she would like to sing a particular song. She is less certain, however, about which musical qualities capture her attention. "That's very intangible," she says. "It's something in my gut. It can happen in 10 seconds, and it usually does. I usually decide within 10 seconds of hearing a song that I want to sing that song.

"It most definitely happened with the score of *Marie Christine*. Just hearing that eerie beginning, my response was, Oh, yes, whatever this is, I want to do it. It's just an instinct; I just sort of know."

So with daring and decisiveness, the 29-year-old actress and singer plays her own flawless game of shoot the moon. Her three Broadway performances—in *Carousel*, *Master Class* and *Ragtime*—all have been crowned with Tony awards. Her two compact discs on Nonesuch Records—the 1998 *Way Back to Paradise* and the recent release *How Glory Goes*—both have been critical and commercial successes, which has endeared her to a recording industry (and to composers) anxious about the future of show tunes. *Marie Christine*—a haunting, near-operatic, Creole-influenced version of *Medea* staged last fall at Lincoln Center in New York City—was written specifically with McDonald in mind.

*Audra McDonald and Victor Garber on the set of ABC's production of Annie.*



## MILLENNIUM PORTRAIT



### AUDRA McDONALD

a beacon of both insight and courage. In last year's TV presentation of *Annie*, the producers introduced a new scene to allow McDonald to perform "Tomorrow." It was her character, Grace, who, along with the orphan moppet, won the heart of billionaire Daddy Warbucks.

Hers is the stuff that Broadway musicals are made of: Young girl dreams of a life on the stage, moves to the big city and takes it by storm. Critics have described McDonald as the first real star of the new millennium. Collaborators have called her a force of nature. "If the American musical didn't already exist, it would have to be invented for Audra McDonald," wrote *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich. Some performers could

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bask for seasons in the light of just one or two of her reviews. But while her transcendent gifts reveal the celestial, McDonald's feet are planted on terra firma. The same wisdom that guides her choice of material also influences her self-awareness.

"Reading your own press and things like that can be very dangerous," she says. "It's easy to fall into the trap. When all of this started to happen, I said, Ooh, my name's in the paper! How exciting! But that can be a big burden in a lot of ways because it can make you very aware of what you do, instead of just concentrating on doing what you do. So I feel as if it's an honor to be called these things, but I don't see myself as that. There's a lot that I still want to do and learn. I see myself as a work in progress."

With her life's first steps, she was apparently on course. McDonald was born in Germany, where her father was stationed in the military, and she grew up in Fresno, Calif., amid a family that was absorbed in music. Her mother sang and played the piano. Her father and his brother each played six musical instruments, and their five sisters were gospel performers.

As Bessie, the more hotheaded of the two outspoken Delaney sisters, in the 1999 television production of *Having Our Say*, McDonald portrayed a young woman who stood as

McDonald, who was raised in the Episcopal Church, was a member of the choir before she was old enough to begin collecting memories.

If there was a day when she discovered music, McDonald cannot recall it. "It was never not in my life," she says. "It was part of the family tradition that you were schooled in some sort of music. I was not going to get away with not being able to play the piano. I was in dance lessons, piano lessons. I joined a junior-company troupe at around age 9, and I started voice lessons after that.

"It was just a part of growing up. I don't think that anybody ever said, 'Pursue it as a career.' It was more like, 'It's a part of your culture; therefore you do it.' I went to a performing-arts junior high school and a performing-arts high school, so I was just completely submersed in it."

Her parents' tastes ran the musical gamut—classical, jazz, big bands, Earth, Wind and Fire—but it was McDonald who brought Broadway show music into the mix.

The junior company that she joined was part of a dinner-theater troupe that mounted small cabarets as well as longer shows, such as *The Wiz*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Evita*.

McDonald landed an impressive share of the starring roles. It was during this period that her love of music fused with a love for being on stage. "It excited me in a good and bad way," she recalls. "It scared me and it was invigorating and thrilling all at the same time. It was like a roller coaster ride. We did a new cabaret every 10 weeks, yearlong. We had our own little junior-company TV show for two years that ran every Saturday.

"As far as a work ethic goes, I think I learned it early because of that. I wasn't one of those kids who got to

Photos (2) by Joan Marcus/Courtesy Philip Rinaldi







*Audra McDonald and Anthony Crivello engage in a powerful moment in the acclaimed musical Marie Christine.*

play with my friends on Saturdays. On Saturdays we rehearsed from 9 to 3. On Sundays I was singing in the church choir. I had my dance, voice and piano lessons during the week, plus doing the cabaret show from 8 to 8:30 every night.

"As a 10-year-old that's a lot of responsibility, but it was good because I've never known my life to be otherwise. If anything, I'm not good at sitting still for a very long time. I don't like to do that because it's not in my blood."



*Audra McDonald as a woman scorned in Marie Christine.*







## MILLENNIUM PORTRAIT



AUDRA  
McDONALD

McDonald's acceptance into the Juilliard School in 1987 brought her to New York City and within striking distance of Broadway. While studying at the conservatory, her restlessness took hold. Aware of Juilliard's prestige and the importance of classical training to the preservation of her voice, McDonald felt privileged to attend, but she also was frustrated by the program's strict focus upon the operatic and classical idioms.

"In retrospect, I am glad that I went," she says. "But the whole time, I was confused about why I was there. My biggest fear was that it was going to take away from my Broadway chops, and I was determined to get into Broadway."

She did not have much longer to wait. After graduating from Juilliard in 1993, she began to tour in *The Secret Garden*. She was on the road when the call came: McDonald's agent urged her to return to New York to audition for a revival of Rogers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*. Her breathtaking soprano and breezy comedic talent were the answers to a casting director's prayers, and the show's producers awarded her the role of Carrie—the no-nonsense best friend of Julie, the impetuous heroine. It was a decision that ventured across the color line, yet nobody blinked when an African-American Carrie sang about then married Mr. Snow. McDonald's canny debut earned her Tony No. 1.

She had made a place for herself on Broadway, but if producers believed they had discovered a niche player, her subsequent performances laid all such notions to rest. In *Master Class*, Terrence McNally's searing exploration of artistic ambitions, McDonald suffered and seethed as Sharon, an opera student tormented by the cruel criticism of her master-class instructor, diva Maria Callas. As her character evolved, McDonald revealed first a creative spirit in search of identity and then the epiphany of an artist in command of her own flight.

As Sarah, the innocent unwed mother in *Ragtime*, she again enacted a character nearly broken by circumstances. In this stage production—as in its literary source, E.L. Doctorow's staccato-paced novel—passions and confusion from the past sometimes threaten and sometimes destroy the lives of people who only want a different future.

Even in a period piece, the part of Sarah might have appeared dated, or worse, it may have been held up as a stereotype. Instead, within McDonald's compassion-

ate, tender portrayal, the desperate young woman is delivered whole, a human being whose shattered heart is redeemed by love. In one sad, terrifying lullaby, we are moved to forgive and even to understand Sarah's wrong decisions.

McDonald's description of her professional purpose does not waver when she discusses the three Tonys.

Astonishment has a place in her repertoire but delusions do not. "It was completely unbelievable, they were all fantasy nights," she says. "I remember hearing my name called each time and just not believing it. They are an incredible honor, but they also create pressure. Does it mean that you have to win a Tony every time you step on stage? I hope that's not what people think. It's impossible to do."

"So it can be a monkey on your back. It can make me feel that every time I get on stage I have to win a Tony, otherwise I'm not as good as I was in my last performance. It's like feeling that you always have to hit the ball out of the park. That can be an amazing amount of pressure to put on someone. I put enough pressure on myself; I really have to work hard not to

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let the awards become an added burden."

It is not surprising that many young composers swear by McDonald. Her two solo recordings feature their compositions, and in her care, each note and lyric is realized. McDonald infuses love songs with passion, pain, vulnerability, strength, mystery, truth, irony, lust, despair, humor. Not a single nuance is wasted and there is no reticence in her approach to sound. Every note is formed perfectly, no matter if it appears as sparkling ripples or as bluesy turbulence. Her cabaret background brings a storyteller's ease to ballads. Her classical training helps conceal the slightest breath, which enhances the seamless quality of her exquisite interpretations.

According to McDonald, her support of new composers evolved naturally. "I don't think that I ever purposely set out to be the person at the front lines with the torch," she says. "For me, it has to do with that instinctual feeling I get when I feel like I must sing that

*Audra McDonald and Lisa Arrindell Anderson make for a stunning pair as the young Bessie and Sadie Delaney in the CBS television movie Having Our Say.*



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song. There are so many singers out there, especially in the musical theater. The big ones have sung every great song there is to sing. It might be a joke, but you can't swing a dead cat without hitting a song that Barbra Streisand has recorded. So a part of it is that I am always looking for new material.

"Also, everybody is worried about musical theater dying out as an art form. People tend to complain that this is happening, but they do not nurture the young composers out there—to get them into a place where they can get their works produced, published and whatnot. There are a lot of great young talents out there who are performers; there are a lot of great young talents out there who are composers. But it's easier to find the performers, in a way, than it is to find the composers."

**"The drama of the moment is much more important to me than perfect, beautiful sound, so if I had to lean one way or the other, I'm willing to sacrifice the sound for the moment."**

However when composer and playwright Michael John LaChiusa heard McDonald, he decided to tackle a myth that he'd dreamed about: the story of a woman with supernatural powers named Marie Christine. A young, willful woman from a rich family in New Orleans, Marie Christine inherited her mother's beauty as well as her ability to cast spells. She falls in love with a white man from Chicago, kills her brother, steals her inheritance, and runs north with her lover. At last, evil begets evil. Her lover, with whom Marie Christine now has two sons, declares that his political ambition will not permit him to marry a mulatta and that he plans to wed an heiress from one of Chicago's powerful families. He also intends to take their sons. Marie Christine's great passion becomes blinding vengeance.

From the moment the chorus of witnesses announces the telling of this tragedy, McDonald is at center stage among warring spirits. She stirs Marie Christine's complexities—temptress, murderer, scorned woman—as an alchemist would, with an unerring sense of which emotions (and which notes) bring life into balance and which cause it to explode. As she sings to her young sons about their futures, Marie

Christine is as gentle as a madonna; when she hurls accusations at the man who has wronged her, the twisted words of love and hate become writhing vipers.

"I think that I'm more of a musical theater performer than an operatic performer, because it is more important to me to get the dramatic content across," McDonald says. "The drama of the

moment is much more important to me than perfect, beautiful sound, so if I had to lean one way or the other, I'm willing to sacrifice the sound for the moment.

"Just to take *Marie Christine*, for example: There was this one song I had to sing when I'm very, very angry—when my lover is telling me that he is going to leave me. At the end of the song there is a line: 'You don't know how far I'd go.' A lot of people would really want to belt that out and make it a really great big sound, but for me it was more about 'I am so angry. I have nothing. I have no other way of expressing this anger than by just screaming at this moment.' That was more important to me than making sure that the E flat was a pretty sound.

"I've always felt that if you're in the right moment emotionally, the sound will come and the sound will be right, no matter what it is. I'm sure that there are a lot of people who would disagree with me, especially in the classical world, but everybody has their own method or madness."

Being between shows seems to allow McDonald time to get really busy. She tours on weekends, performing music from *How Glory Goes*. On weekdays, she studies with her voice and acting coaches, reviews new material, and works with collaborators on a production of *The Seven Deadly Sins* that draws her ever so gently into the realm of opera. She squeezes in TV-acting parts that appeal to her. Fortunately, her fiancé, whom she met at Juilliard, plays the stand-up bass in her touring trio, so the little downtime she has is spoken for. She supposes that at some time in the future she will slow down a bit, but now she is living her one and only life.

"Performing is a major part of who I am," McDonald says, "so I feel that if I didn't do this, if I didn't perform, in a way I would cease to exist. It's like my life force. Why do you keep breathing? Because you have to in order to live. I think that my work is the same thing.

"I could break it down in a way. I could say that I love the electricity of being in front of a live audience, that I love the electricity of being in communion with that audience and never being quite sure, ever, of what is going to happen, even though you've rehearsed something. You can't control live theater in a way. You can control it to a degree, but the rest is up to fate. And that's thrilling. That's really thrilling."