

Former Richmonder talks about her role in upcoming 'Sister Act'

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Richmonder Nancy Evans was only 6 years old when she first sang for a paying audience. She and her friends living on West Grace Street charged a nickel for their neighborhood show, which featured Evans performing a Hawaiian lullaby.

Now, the 63-year-old Thomas Jefferson High School alum is coming back to town to ham it up as Sister Mary Lazarus in "Sister Act." The touring production plays the Altria Theater on Friday and Saturday as part of the Broadway in Richmond series.

"That was my first professional job," Evans said of the Grace Street show during an interview from the tour. "We were always putting on little shows."

Evans went on to perform in shows at Albert Hill Middle School and in musicals at Thomas Jefferson High as well as shows at Temple Beth-El, the Jewish Community Center (now Weinstein JCC) and Dogwood Dell.

"Singing at Dogwood Dell was a thrill," she said. "Richmond was such a nice place to grow up."

Evans turned her attention to opera after graduating from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and traveled the world performing. She moved to musical theater in 2007. "Sister Act" is her second national tour.

Produced by actor and comedian Whoopi Goldberg, who starred in the "Sister Act" films, the five-time Tony-nominated musical tells the story of disco diva Deloris Van Cartier, who witnesses a murder and is put into protective custody in the one place police are sure she won't be found: a convent.

Deloris disguises herself as a nun but resists the rigid lifestyle, causing her to butt heads with Mother Superior. During her stay, she gives the choir and the church a new direction but blows her cover in the process.

The role of choir director Sister Mary Lazarus is "so much fun," Evans said. "She has a dry wit and is irreverent even though she is a nun. She starts off starchy and curmudgeonly and ends up with a deep friendship with Deloris."

Lazarus helps the nuns find the joy in music again.

"She has such a good time," Evans said of her character. "They all pull together as a group."

Evans and Maggie Clennon Reberg, who plays Mother Superior, have formed a bond during the tour.

"She is a delight and is hilarious on stage. She does a great job," Reberg said of Evans. "We kind of feel like the den mothers of this group. We are women of a certain age. We are surrounded by younger professionals, and that keeps us on our toes."

Reberg viewed her role as Mother Superior as a “marvelous” challenge after seeing what the character goes through and how that metamorphosis is played out in front of the audience.

“She is easily the most transformed character in the show,” Reberg said. “When you first meet her, she is the alpha nun of the pack. She is in control. She is a strong mountain of a woman, and in comes a hurricane of equal force: Deloris.”

The constant tension between the two women has Mother Superior questioning her job, her life and even God.

“She doesn’t understand why God isn’t helping her,” said Reberg, adding that her character keeps asking for a sign from God as to what she should do. “One of my favorite moments in the show is when she realizes Deloris is the sign. It’s a great moment.”

The friendships and loyalty associated with the sisterhood the nuns have formed resonate with Evans.

“There are so many levels of joy in the show,” she said. “It’s easy for me to hook up with it and enjoy it. There is an integral part of me that connects with Sister Mary Lazarus. It’s something bigger than yourself that influences people and touches them in a big way.”

Fans of the 1992 film will notice that the musical follows the same plot as the film. The most significant difference is the music. The film, set in the late 1960s in Reno, Nev., featured

music from popular girl groups of the 1950s and '60s. The musical takes place in Philadelphia during the 1970s and '80s.

“It is the height of the disco era,” Reberg said.

The musical also features an original score with music by Academy-, Grammy- and Golden Globe Award-winning composer Alan Menken (“Little Shop of Horrors,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “The Little Mermaid” and “Enchanted”).

“Alan infused our story with this infectious disco beat,” Reberg said. “We have that language and rhythm as well as blues and gospel.”

The theme of the show is solidly linked to the music.

“What audiences will feel is the transformative power of making music together,” Reberg said. “Through this musical journey each night, the audience is on its feet dancing and clapping and singing. The finale knocks your socks off. We (the cast and audience) come together through this music the same way the characters come together in the play.”

Reberg feels honored and privileged to be in the production.

“Even if I was an objective observer with no ties, I would love it,” she said. “This musical is so substantial. It has such heart.”

The show marks Evans’ third time portraying a nun, having performed in “The Sound of Music” and a Christmas version of “Nunsense.”

“I’ve never been a nun that sparkles, and I sparkle in this one,” she said, laughing. “I even get to do a rap, which is great fun. Sister Mary Lazarus gets into it with no holds barred.”

This will be the first time Evans has appeared on a Richmond stage since leaving home in 1969. About 20 classmates who are members of the TJ Supper Club Class of 1969 are coming to the opening performance.

David and Janet Straus of Henrico County both went to school with Evans and can't wait to see her in the show.

"She was always interested in the choir and doing plays, especially musicals," he said. "She was always outgoing and vivacious. She set her sights on getting into performing at an early age."

The group will get together with Evans after the show.

"It will be our first time seeing her on stage since high school," Straus said.

Evans is looking forward to the reunion.

"I have a lot of people coming to all three shows," she said. "I am very excited."