

Karla Burns Reprises Role Of Famous Wichitan Hattie McDaniel In 'Hi- Hat Hattie'

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Pianist Huron Breaux, star Karla Burns and director Rick Bumbgardner pose after a rehearsal for "Hi-Hat Hattie." The show opens Friday at Roxy's Downtown.

Tony Award nominee and Laurence Olivier Award-winner Karla Burns will once again take center stage in her portrayal of fellow Wichitan and

actress Hattie McDaniel in the
musical "Hi-Hat Hattie."



Credit Courtesy

Karla Burns as Hattie McDaniel in "Hi-Hat Hattie." Burns says she's frequently compared to the pioneering actress, who was the first African American to win an Oscar.

The show details the life and career of the pioneering actress, who was the first African American to receive an Oscar, for her role as the slave Mammy in "Gone with the Wind."

Burns says the production is entertaining, but it's also educational. She hopes the audience includes young people.

"It will teach them about someone they have no idea who she is: Hattie McDaniel, coming from Wichita, Kansas, winning an Oscar," she says. "And there's nothing dirty about the show, it just very much gives you information about being an actor, being a large black woman who is able to have made it through time and done this."

For Burns, the role is a natural fit: She has for decades been compared to McDaniel. Both women played Queenie in different productions of the musical "Showboat," for which

Burns received the Laurence Olivier Award, Britain's most prestigious award for theatre.

Burns previously portrayed McDaniel in a 2004 production of "Hi-Hat Hattie," directed by Rick Bumbgardner, who reunites with Burns for this production. The two, along with pianist Huron Breaux, got together recently to discuss the show with KMUW's Carla Eckels.

Burns' signature one-woman show opens Friday at Roxy's Downtown in Wichita.

Interview highlights

Karla Burns on getting involved with "Hi-Hat Hattie":

Years ago, when I was in Europe, I came home from doing a recording of Showboat and there had been a documentary [about the show] on

television and it was seen by the person who wrote the piece, [Larry Parr]. They just done a big kind of promotion for getting "Hi-Hat Hattie" out to producers all over the country and in New York City. ... What had happened was three producers had seen it and then sent it for me to do and from there I began to get involved. Larry Parr told me later that he'd seen me on television from London about "Showboat" and said, "She's the one I want."



Credit Carla Eckels / KMUW

Karla Burns stands next to the posts on Wichita's Redbud Trail honoring her and Hattie McDaniel.

On similarities to Hattie McDaniel:

I've noticed very much the similarities. I'm a round woman. That's a struggle for me. I've noticed that people do often look at your color your size and it makes a difference as to what roles you get. [McDaniel] had the same struggles at a time when people looked at every bit of you and you were blessed to get a part, which is what made her so special. Because Hattie McDaniel, she took the lines – she'd take the words and because she knew how to sass them up, she didn't serve anybody. She [played] a subservient role but she was never a subservient human being.

Rick Bumgardner on Hattie McDaniel being the first African American person to win an Oscar:

She didn't go to the premiere of "Gone with the Wind," couldn't come to the theater where it was being shown. The Loews Theatre in Atlanta

wouldn't let African-American people inside the building, so she couldn't even attend the premiere of a show that she won the Academy Award for.

On the show's wide appeal:

One of the keys to me was that I wanted to have this appeal to all audiences. I wanted my Caucasian group to come and see this and recognize the struggles that we still have today, that this woman had 70 and 80 years ago as she was getting started in this business. I think I bring that flavor to it and remind them that as we talk about things, there's a portion in ["Hi-Hat Hattie"] that is the Academy Award speech and Fay Bainter is the one who gave Hattie McDaniel the award for her portrayal in "Gone with the Wind." Faye was was honored to be able to do that.

She says at that time that we welcome the opportunity to do this in America because in America we celebrate the achievements of all people, regardless of their race, religion, creed. You know, today we are struggling with those very same issues here in America. That was in 1939, we are in 2018. Eighty years later we still struggle with that same thing.

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