

Back in 1990, Karla Burns returned to her native Wichita during a successful theater career in London that included an Olivier Award for her performance in "Showboat."

While back, she discovered that three people had sent scripts to her Wichita house to peruse, thinking she'd be a perfect fit.

All three of those scripts were for "**Hi-Hat Hattie**," a one-woman show about another successful Wichita native, **Hattie** McDaniel. Her agent called her, asking her to take a look at a script he was sending – also for "**Hi-Hat Hattie**."

Then-Wichita Eagle theater critic Rhonda Holman saw a production of "**Hattie**" in Denver, called Burns and said, "You ought to be doing this."

Once Burns had read Larry Parr's script, she began research on McDaniel and discovered more coincidences: both had childhood homes about 10 blocks apart, both were the youngest children in their families, both had similar physical appearances down to gaps in their front teeth, and both balanced careers as singers and actresses, down to winning awards for the same part: Queenie in "Showboat."

"There are definitely similarities in our lives," Burns, now 63, says. "I learn more and more about the similarities, both in wonderful ways and in the angst and pain."

After a mini-tour of the show in 1990, in far-flung places such as Sarasota, Fla., Albany, N.Y., and Columbus, Ohio, she gave a few performances of "**Hattie**" in Wichita, but hasn't taken on the role in about 12 years.

Burns returns to McDaniel this weekend at Roxy's Downtown for a two-weekend revival of "**Hi-Hat Hattie**."

Returning to the role, Burns said, has been a blessing.

"I believe it's changed because I'm older and I know more and I've read more and I've learned more about me," she said.

"**Hi-Hat Hattie**" is set in about 1950, director Rick Bumgardner said, with McDaniel returning to a theater she hasn't played in 30 years.

In reality, McDaniel died of breast cancer at age 57 in 1952, as she was playing the title role in the TV series "Beulah."

The Roxy's production of "**Hattie**" includes several mini-reunions. First, it reunites Burns with director Bumgardner, who last worked with her in 2004's version.

"I have a different grasp on the message I want to tell," he said. "We've really been delving into that, and I'm steering her in some different directions for what I want to get across."

It also brings Burns back together with Gordon Twist, who arranged the 14 songs in the show (including "Amazing Grace," "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" and "St. Louis Blues" and was the original accompanist.

"The fact that Karla is so much like her, it's weird. It's uncanny. When I first met Karla, it was like I knew her forever," Twist said. "It's become a very, very important project for me in my psyche, in my heart."

Twist said he gets emotional thinking about McDaniel's story.

"The fact that she could accomplish so much within herself and fight the system at the same time," he said. "She opened so many doors for black actors and actresses pursuing their careers. Had it not been for **Hattie**

McDaniel playing maids and those kinds of roles, the doors would never had been open.”

The accompanist now is Huron Breaux, who visited with Twist during the 2004 performance, when the latter told the former he’d be playing that music someday.

Breaux said he likes McDaniel’s message that Burns brings to the stage.

“Be who you are,” Breaux said. “When you’re truly that, then your gift shines. It creates space for you.”

Many of the issues that McDaniel, who had stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for both acting and singing, faced are still prevalent today, Burns said.

“When I think about some of the things that happened around her and to her, that are explored in this piece, I look at my own life and being here,” she said. “There’s nothing to me that’s a deficit. It’s all an asset.”

‘HI-HAT HATTIE’

When: 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays, from April 13-22

Where: Roxy’s Downtown, 412 ½ E. Douglas

Tickets: \$20-\$30, by phone at 265-4400 or at roxysdowntown.com

Copyright 2018 The Wichita Eagle