

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Souvenir

A Fantasia on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins

BY STEPHEN TEMPERLEY
DIRECTED BY VIVIAN MATALON
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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CREATING THE CUCKOO IN THE CLOCK

An Interview with Judy Kaye

BY DAN RUBIN

Since originating the role of Florence Foster Jenkins in *Souvenir* for The York Theatre Company in 2004, the inimitable Judy Kaye has taken the character on the road to Broadway and theaters across the country. Kaye was last seen at A.C.T. in 2007 playing the murderous Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*, a role she also performed on Broadway and the national tour that followed. Shortly before returning to bring Mme Jenkins to life for San Francisco audiences, she spoke with us about the difficulties and delights of embodying the misunderstood diva who couldn't hold a tune.

WHAT HAS IT BEEN LIKE INTERWEAVING PERFORMANCES OF MRS. LOVETT WITH FLORENCE FOSTER JENKINS OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS?

Isn't that amazing? I've thought about the fact that, if that's what I did for the rest of my life—go back and forth between those two roles—how bad could that be? So far in my career (and I've gotten to play just some wonderful characters in wonderful plays and pieces), these are my two favorite characters. They overlap in that they are both self-deluded. Mrs. Lovett has convinced herself that Sweeney Todd loves her, and of course Florence is convinced that the music lovers of the world love her.

DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU ARE BEING TRUE TO WHO FLORENCE FOSTER JENKINS WAS?

I believe with all my heart that I am, but I never met the lady. The problem with what is supposedly known about her is that it all comes out as gossip. None of it seems to be anything you can hang your hat on. The title of the play is *Souvenir: A "Fantasia" on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins*. We're not bound by realism; in fact we're promoting a nonrealistic, somewhat whimsical look at the possible relationship between Florence and Cosme McMoon. When we were first breaking the play in at the York, I hoped that somebody who had known her or who had been at her Carnegie Hall concert might still be on the



Judy Kaye and Donald Corren in *Souvenir*. Photo by Carol Rosegg.

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planet. Of course, there are really *a lot* of those people and they would come up after to talk to me about her.

HOW DO THEY REMEMBER HER?

Florence was, as my mother used to say, a queer duck. She believed completely in herself and her abilities, and what is important is that she was not setting things up. She was not singing badly on purpose. She really was sincere. She thought she was a great artist and that she was serving the muse and the music. The play would be one joke if it was just about a woman who sang badly, and it's not about that at all. It's about Cosme's journey and how this woman affected it. They forged a friendship in a very peculiar, wonderful way. Alongside that, you have her devotion to art and perfection and the question of self-delusion. How many of us are deluding ourselves? Aren't we all?

THAT SEEMS LIKE A TERRIFYING PROSPECT TO CONFRONT EIGHT TIMES A WEEK ONSTAGE. DO YOU EVER WORRY, "WHAT IF I'M LIKE FLORENCE AND NOBODY IS TELLING ME?"

Actors go through that every five seconds. That's what makes us get up in the morning. Everybody thinks that actors have these huge strong egos, but it's only the slightly talented amateur who has that much confidence. Everybody else is filled with doubt.

HOW DO YOU SING POORLY WELL?

Pitch is created in the brain. It's not in the throat. It is a cognitive activity. So when I'm doing this material it's almost like I'm singing an alternate melody. The performance is very set. It has been worked out over a rehearsal period, and my costar, Donald, has to be able to follow me. It's like all good comedy: a Swiss clock. It's honed and I'm giving it as much care as if I were singing very well.

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WAS READING THIS SCRIPT YOUR FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH JENKINS?

Not my first hearing, no. Listening to her recordings has been a rite of passage for vocal music students since those recordings came out in the '40s. You'd go to a party and somebody would say, "Oh, you have to hear this new soprano. She's so brilliant." They'd put it on, and slowly the room would dissolve. That's the thing about this play: it's very funny, but it's also very touching, and the audience is pulled up short. They feel, at some point, at least a little embarrassed that they have laughed at this lady, and we have all laughed at her. And it's healthy that we're embarrassed.