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INTERVIEW BY NANCY BIZJACK

Christine Andreas

Christine Andreas bloomed on Broadway as Eliza Doolittle in the 20th anniversary production of *My Fair Lady*, for which she won the Theatre World Award. That triumph was quickly followed by Tony-nominated turns as Laurey in the 1980 revival of *Oklahoma!* and as Frankie Frayne in *On Your Toes*. She last appeared on Broadway in 2011 as Jacqueline in the Tony/Olivier Award-winning production of *La Cage Aux Folles* with **Kelsey Grammer**, after starring as Margaret Johnson in the much-acclaimed national tour of *The Light in the Piazza*.

Through the years, Andreas has guest-performed on TV shows and with various symphonies, including Tulsa Philharmonic in 1990, but lately she's received rave reviews for her intimate cabaret shows at venerated venues such as New York's Café Carlyle, the Algonquin's Oak Room and Feinstein's/54 Below.

"She finds a blend of lyricism and sweet sensuality that only the finest Broadway voices can conjure," says the *New York Times*. Legendary columnist **Liz Smith** wrote: "Christine Andreas is everything anyone who loves romantic pop music could want — simply *sine qua non*." Andreas' Carnegie Hall debut was hailed as



Emilie Silvestri

"brilliant," "delicious" and "sexy" in *Variety*.

The singer brings her latest project, *Piaf: No Regrets*, to Tulsa this month before taking it to London, then back — by popular demand — to 54 Below, where the show premiered last summer, with *Cabaret Scenes Magazine* calling it "insightful, heartfelt and lustrous."

Andreas spoke to INTERMISSION in July while vacationing with her husband, composer **Martin Silvestri**, in Italy.

What made you decide to do a show about Edith Piaf? I think she haunted me; she really did. She haunted me in a number of ways, and I kept saying, "I'm not singing you!" Because it's way too hard — all of that French. I kept pushing her to the side and she kept coming back, usually in show form. A friend of mine, **Raphael Dirkson**, convinced me to do a show about her, which I did, believe it or not, on a beautiful, high-end cruise line called Crystal Cruises. Raphael, who's French-Canadian and the bandmaster on the *Crystal Serenity*, convinced me to do the show, and he sent me a treatment on how he saw the show arced, and it was stunning, absolutely stunning. And I use a lot of that in my own show.

In what other ways did Piaf haunt you? My second haunting came from my friend **Pascal Rioult**, a former **Martha Graham** dancer along with his wife Joyce. He was mounting a show called *Street Singer* in New York, and he stumbled upon me. I ended up singing Piaf to the movement of these incredibly beautiful and dynamic dancers of Pascal's company, RIOULT Dance New York. So I had these two completely different references for shows about Piaf. Pascal is French-Parisian and Raphael is French-Canadian, but both of them have a very heavy connection to Piaf. But I wasn't so sure I wanted to do a Piaf show, because I'd done a show on **Judy Garland**, and I didn't really want to get into any

"victim" show. I don't like that storyboard. I don't like coming from a victim place. And Piaf had such a nutty life — drugs and affairs and lots of dependency — that I thought, "Nah, I'm not going to go there."

So why did you? Well, I started getting intrigued by her and went deeper. You know, you always have to go deeper. I went deeper on Garland when I did that show, and it sucked the life force out of me, as much as I love Judy Garland. When I went deeper with Piaf, it actually was so pro-life, so expanding. I don't know how to say it; it was pure life force. Her credo was "The most important thing in life is a resilient heart." That's beautiful, right? And that's

really how she lived. I wouldn't want her life; it was insane. But it was the life she wanted, so she didn't feel sorry for herself. And she was a true artist. She was always on the cutting edge of what connected her to the time and to the public.

In the show, are you impersonating Piaf or are you just being yourself, presenting your interpretation of the songs she popularized? Both!

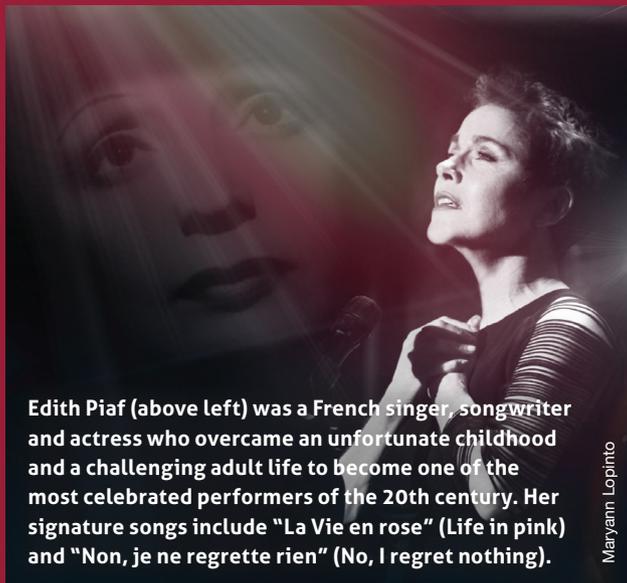
It's kind of interesting how it has evolved, and I have a feeling it will continue to evolve. In Pascal's show, this wonderful writer, **Drew Harris**, had monologues that she did, and I interpolated, with his permission, a number of those monologues where I am her, because it's one thing to *tell* you about somebody, but then when you actually *become* them, it gives the audience much more of an understanding of the force that was that person. And I sing enough in English, or I set up a song with enough English, that you're not at a loss to know what I'm saying or singing about, even if I'm singing to you in French.

Do you speak French? No, I don't. I have a great accent, but I don't speak it, although I've always been drawn to the language because of the music that's inherent in it. However, I have, of course, studied everything I'm singing, and I've been coached by Parisians to have a connection to the French lyrics. I know what I'm singing. It's not just me making pretty sounds. It's grounded in the reality of Piaf singing these songs.

Who else is involved in this show? Does your husband accompany you? Yeah, he's vocal-bombing me! **He's what?** You know, there's photo-bombing and there's vocal-bombing. [laughs] First of all, we learned early on in working together that yes, I have this lovely, clear, really different kind of sound and people love it, but it's always fun when you break it up with another vocal texture. Marty is a theatrical composer by trade, but we learned that it was fun to travel together, to do shows together, and to make music together. Our

first gig was the White House. George the First. Not Washington, but **George Bush senior**. We played the White House together, and people loved the couple thing. So our music-making has evolved — we've been together 26 years. For this particular show, it's Piaf, so why is there a guy? Well, we found a tune she did called "The Poor

did you know?



Edith Piaf (above left) was a French singer, songwriter and actress who overcame an unfortunate childhood and a challenging adult life to become one of the most celebrated performers of the 20th century. Her signature songs include "La Vie en rose" (Life in pink) and "Non, je ne regrette rien" (No, I regret nothing).

Maryann Lopinto

People of Paris," and **Rosemary Clooney** and **Bing Crosby** did a take on it, so we do that tune in the set.

Does Martin also play the piano in the show? Yes, he plays the piano and accordion. And he's a showman. He's charming. He's **Maurice Chevalier**. You know, one of those guys. He can do whatever. He's really amusing [laughs].

You performed in a Tulsa Philharmonic Pops concert featuring Rodgers & Hammerstein music here in 1990.

A long time ago! **Peter Nero** conducted, and I performed with **Ron Raines**. I knew Ron and asked for him because he's funny, first of all. I like people to be funny, to have a good sense of humor, so they're not stiff on stage. It was one of my first symphonic gigs, but I knew that canon so well. I think we ended the first act dancing to "Shall We Dance?" and Ron and I just danced off the stage. We had a blast!

Will this be your first time back at the Tulsa PAC since then? I believe it will be. **But you were nearby, at the Broken Arrow PAC, just last year.** Yes! With *4Girls4*. That was a lot of fun too. I mean, singing with **Andrea McArdle**, **Faith Prince** and **Maureen McGovern**. Look who I'm singing with — we're all major

Broadway survivors [laughs]. To keep on doing what you do throughout the years is challenging and requires a lot of imagination — talent isn't everything. These girls are still out there making a joyful noise, so it was a lot of fun.

What's next for you? I just recorded this show. We're finishing up the CD of *Piaf: No Regrets* with 36 fantastic musicians in London. I don't know if I'll have it ready when I come to Tulsa or not, but I'm really excited about it because it was difficult for me, and mostly it's come out just the way I wanted it to. *Piaf* is my project right now.

Do people need to be familiar with Piaf to enjoy your show? Some people know

Piaf; some people don't. You may think you know her. You've heard her, you've read about her life, but you really don't. To really understand a life that began with such adversity — abandoned by her mother at birth, Jesus Christmas, it doesn't get too much rougher than that! And then to become *her*. I mean, that's a great soul. In this crazy time we're living in, if I can put a great soul before you in an entertaining way, I'm really happy to do that.

Piaf – No Regrets

Presented by **Choregus Productions**

September 7 at 8 p.m.

LIDDY DOENGES THEATRE

Tickets at tulsapac.com and
918-596-7111