

From Rouge to 'Blues'

By Pat Craig
Correspondent

AS YOU READ your paper, a thought wafts across your mind and you wonder how one might become a star of the Moulin Rouge in Paris.

Debbie de Coudreaux, who was the center of attention at the legendary nightclub where Josephine Baker once held sway, can tell you exactly how. You grow up tall in Oakland, finish your education, get a job at Wells Fargo, have a friend tell you they're hiring tall girls in Las Vegas, get a job there, become a singer and get offered a job at Moulin Rouge.

Simple, if you're tall (she says she's 6 feet without shoes on), talented (judge for yourself in "Blues in the Night," currently playing at the Leshler Center in Walnut Creek) and have the

sort of winning personality that stretches well beyond the spotlight.

The personality is just as charming across a table in a meeting room at the Leshler, where de Coudreaux chats before a performance of "Blues."

Stroke of luck

Had it not been for the insistence of her friend, Bay Area-based actress and director Kim Richards, a pal since high school, de Coudreaux might still be working in banking, or doing something with her degree in political science. But Richards demanded that de Coudreaux go to the audition, and, like most good show business stories, in no time the tall banker was dancing in Las Vegas, a discovery of legendary Fluff LeCoque, head of the famed "Jubilee" revue.

Soon she learned the singers made more money than the dancers, so de Coudreaux asked for an audition with legendarily grumpy Donn Arden, another "Jubilee" producer. Despite dire predictions from pals, she soon was working as a singer.

It was a great life, with custom gowns and other costumes worn in shows that ranged from "Jubilee" to "Hello, Hollywood, Hello!" in Reno. Not long after that, she became lead performer at the Moulin Rouge, where she spent eight years.

Even with that kind of resume, de Coudreaux admits she was reluctant when Center Repertory Company artistic director Michael Butler called to ask if she might be interested in the show there.

"Michael called and I told him I was really flattered, but I don't do blues, R&B or

'BLUES IN THE NIGHT'

Conceived by Sheldon Epps; directed and choreographed by Robert Barry Fleming; presented by Center Repertory Company

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. Sundays through June 25

WHERE: Leshler Center for the Arts, Civic Drive at Locust Street, Walnut Creek

RUNNING TIME: 2 hours

TICKETS: \$36-\$45; 925-943-7469 or www.centerrep.org

gospel. I always think of blues and Bessie Smith — heavy, deep," she says. "But then, I went to the audition and the first thing they did was ask me to sing 'Lush Life' — Billy Strayhorn, yes; well, blues is the bedrock of jazz. What I do, my type of singing I consider kind of jazz light. I looked at the songs, and there was Harold Arlen, who is my god. And if Harold Arlen isn't soulful, I don't know what is."

Comfort zone

She says the score turned out to have many tunes she felt comfortable performing, and a lot that were just plain fun.

"They're bluesy and jazzy with a cleaner musical flow," she says. "I thought, 'Yes, I can do this; these are songs that are clever, bawdy, witty and poignant, and after all is said and done, they make you feel good.'"

That was important to de Coudreaux. She saw the show as a sort of test for herself because she'd been having problems with her voice after a cold, and for a time was unable to sing. In the show, de Coudreaux plays a character called The Woman of the World, a role that pretty much sums up her career — the gigs in Las Vegas, the Moulin Rouge, television and film throughout Europe, performances in New York and around the United States and Broadway — but the similarity ends there.

Her character lives in a cheap Chicago hotel in the 1930s; de Coudreaux has returned home to Oakland to help care for her father. Since coming home, she has performed with Teatro ZinZanni a couple of times, was a guest soloist with the Oakland East Bay Symphony in a concert performance of "Show Boat," and appeared in plays at Woodminster Summer Musicals and 42nd Street Moon. She also teaches

music and theater courses at Holy Names High School, a girls school in Oakland where she also has directed some musical comedy.

"I really think we need to put a spotlight on musical theater, which, after all, is an American invention," she says. "It is our baby and something that should be revered and promoted in every school as part of our heritage."

'Gospel of music'

She loves the chance to preach the gospel of music and dance to her "kids" at the high school, but when push comes to shove, her home and a big part of her life is onstage.

In "Blues," de Coudreaux is enjoying her cast mates, and is especially fond of Broadway and film veteran Armelia McQueen, a tiny powerhouse of a performer best known as a star of the original Broadway hit "Ain't Misbehavin'," who knocks out de Coudreaux with her talent.

"Armelia, she is amazing. I love her," she says. "She can go from a hysterical, bawdy thing, then turn around with a ballad that just stabs you in the heart. She comes out and you're thinking she's going to be doing something funny, then she opens her mouth with this beautiful song."

She also enjoys working with director Robert Barry Fleming, who allows some innovation from his cast, which is why de Coudreaux performs a little dance with a couple of outsize feather fans, as a homage to her previous work.

"I just saw the feathers sitting there on a table, and said, 'Oh my,' and Robert said, 'Go ahead,'" she says. "What's the saying? It was like a duck taking to water."

The production also has inspired de Coudreaux to return to working on a one-woman show she wrote for her master of fine arts thesis. It deals with her fantasy relationship with legendary singer Lena Horne, whose performing life has some parallels to hers.

Growing up, she was a big fan of Horne's and imagined her living a happy, glamorous life. In the solo show, the ghostly presence of Horne visits de Coudreaux at a rehearsal, gives her tips on performing and sets her straight on how life really was for her.

"Singing in 'Blues in the Night' is almost like channeling her," says de Coudreaux. "The one-woman show is kind of like Lena telling me, 'Wake up, girlfriend.'"

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CENTER REPERTORY COMPANY
Debbie de Coudreaux's feathery outfit in Center Rep's "Blues in the Night" was inspired by her days as a performer at the famed Moulin Rouge in Paris.