

Audra McDonald

Winner of the most Tony Awards in history, she is “probably the most talented person on the planet.”
By **CARLTON WILKINSON.**

IN JANUARY, BEFORE THE CORONAVIRUS crisis hit the US, I had the opportunity to interview versatile Broadway star Audra McDonald, whom *The New York Times* has called “probably the most talented person on the planet.” She has won more Tony awards than any other actor, most recently for her resurrection of jazz legend Billie Holiday in “Lady Day at the Emerson Bar and Grill.” • I had interviewed Ms. McDonald once before—in 1989. Not yet known to the world, she was starring in a summer stock production of “Man of La Mancha” in a regional theater in a small town in Pennsylvania. Her presence onstage and her voice, even then, were electric. • Just three years later, she was appearing on Broadway in “The Secret Garden”; in 1994, she won her first Tony for “Carousel.” • Today her name is a household word. Emmys, Grammys, operas, TV shows, blockbuster Hollywood films, solo albums and concert recitals—she’s covered all of that. She currently stars as Liz Lawrence in CBS’s *The Good Fight*, now in its fourth season, and will be playing Aretha Franklin’s mother in the upcoming biopic, *Respect*. In Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* she was Madame Garderobe, an opera diva transformed into a wardrobe. • In 2016, President Barack Obama awarded her the National Medal of Arts—the US’s highest honor for artists—and she was named one of *Time Magazine*’s 100 most influential people. • Catching up with her again in January was a thrill and felt briefly like closing a loop. • Then, the coronavirus pandemic struck and completely shut down the theater district in New York.

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In response to the crisis, artists including Ms. McDonald refuse to be silenced and have been performing online from their homes—intimate glimpses of talent shared in an effort to do what the arts has always done: connect people and allow them a vehicle to share their strongest emotions. The performances also raise money for the Broadway community through The Actors Fund, which has set up a website to stream live webcasts twice a day.

The virus also hits each of us, including Broadway stars, in personal ways. The death of playwright Terrence McNally last week from the virus was a terrible and disturbing blow to the theater world. His many plays and musicals set the tone for stage culture, capturing the sentiment of the age.

Audra McDonald was often featured in those productions. In Mr. McNally’s 1995 “Master Class,” she appeared as a student of opera star Maria Callas played by the late Zoe Caldwell. The role won her a Tony and catapulted her to fame. She and Mr. McNally became close friends and she has since starred in other stagings of his work, including “Ragtime,” and “Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune.”

“My dear sweet brilliant kind Terrence,” she said on Twitter. “The world is not nearly as sweet of a place without you in it. My heart is breaking yet again.”

In the interview below, only weeks before these events unfolded, it was clear that she remains a compassionate and strong woman, unmoved by celebrity, her emotions available for anyone to see. She dismisses the spectacular scope of her career as a function of her “hyperactivity.” In conversation, information flows from her in fire-hose recountings, over rocky struggles to find the right word and through sudden surges of emotion.

Offstage, she serves on the board of Covenant House, a global shelter for homeless and abused young people. She won recognition from the Human Rights Campaign, the US’s largest LGBTQ rights organization, for her public engagement on equality and anti-bullying. She has a 3-year-old, a college-age daughter, and two stepsons.

When we met in 1989, you had just completed your first year at Juilliard School of Music. Do you think you were prepared for what was coming?

Well, it’s not like it’s a career that took me by surprise; it’s the only thing I had ever done, before I’d gone to Juilliard. I’d done all this theater in Fresno, California. I felt very much at home and very much at peace back up onstage, taking a break from school. But in terms of the way my career would take off—that, I wasn’t prepared for. That, I wasn’t

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expecting. I don’t think I could have dreamt the career that I’ve had.

You’ve talked about how you had “made a feeble attempt” at suicide while you were at Juilliard. Was that a reaction to the pressures at school pushing you toward opera, rather than musicals?

That had a lot to do with what was going on. I was feeling very, very lost—very, very conflicted. My entire life, all I ever wanted to do was musical theater. And all of a sudden, here I was—not forced, I mean I went to Juilliard of my own choice. But I think I didn’t really research how rigorous and how specific the training would be.

I had no desire to go into opera, and yet that’s all that I was being allowed to study. That’s why you and I met 30 years ago. Because I went very much against my teachers’ wishes and auditioned for summer stock instead of going to a classical program somewhere. So, yes, that coupled with just being generally very, very depressed by that point—that’s a very true story. I did try to commit suicide.

Is that part of your interest in Covenant House?
Yes, absolutely. I wasn’t suffering from homelessness. I did have a supportive family. A lot of the Covenant House kids do not. A lot of them just have nobody. A lot of them have mental health issues or have aged out of the foster care system; a lot of them have suffered domestic violence, sex trafficking. Some are young women who are pregnant or with young children and no place to go. To have a safe space, a home, a soft place to land—and not just to land, but to be taken care of and nurtured—it’s so important. All the special lives that have been altered because of Covenant House—it is incredible. If any of your readers are looking for a place to be charitable, the Covenant House is worth a look.

How did you build a relationship with them? Did they approach you?

No! I was getting ready to open “Lady Day” on Broadway and I was looking for a place to donate money for an opening night gift. I started thinking about Billie Holiday’s childhood and how awful it was. She was homeless, sexually trafficked, abused. I’d heard about Covenant House, so I thought, that’s a good idea for a donation. If she had had a place like that maybe she would have had a better time of it.

I went down there to do a donation, between a matinee and an evening preview. But because it was a Saturday, the office staff wasn’t there. There’s 24/7 care for the residents, but at that moment they



were having trouble finding someone who had the authority to take a check. While they were doing that, I was sitting there. And I watched a kid come in off the street. And I [voice breaking]—you know, I still get emotional thinking about this kid and watching him go from being so frightened and so alone—the fear and the toughness in the eyes of this boy, maybe 16? And to watch them jump into action and just catch him—it just took my breath away.

Sorry I got emotional. I’ve been with them ever since. Almost six years ago now.

You must be flooded with offers of roles. Is there any calculus to sort them out?

No! There is no calculus anywhere in my brain. I’m laughing about that because my older stepson is in college and was taking us through one of his calculus problems. He lost me after the first three words.

No, I go with my gut. I always feel like I’m being presented with the right thing at the right time. And the signal I get from my gut literally is, “That scares me to death.” The thing that scares me to death is usually the thing I run toward artistically. That’s where you’re going to learn the most. You may fall flat on your face, but it will be a learning experience. I’m all about evolution. So that’s my calculus: Run towards the danger.

In one episode of The Good Fight, Liz describes the impact of voter suppression over generations in the Black community. Does portraying that kind of activism feel like real activism?

It does. If my role were to talk about why voter suppression is important, I would do that—I would

In 1996, Audra McDonald won her second Tony award for her role as a student to Zoe Caldwell’s Maria Callas in “Master Class,” above left. In 2012, she starred in Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess,” right. As Billie Holiday in “Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar & Grill” in 2014, below, she won a record-breaking sixth Tony award.



question it, but I would absolutely do it. That’s my job as an actor. But to have my character be so seamless with who I am in terms of what I believe and my values, it makes it easier for me to play these roles. This role in particular.

That’s a testament not only to the show runners, Robert and Michelle King, but also to the fact that we have African American writers in the room, speaking from their own experience. That’s so important, to diversify the stories we are telling in the world and to make sure you have people not only that are being cast in these roles, but people behind the scenes that can bring these stories to life.

Is it difficult to switch between the needs of opera, musicals, Broadway, TV and film?

I find that they all illuminate each other. When I’m doing television work, it’s so much about specificity and thinking loudly, but you’ve got the camera right there. The moment has to be very calculated, but small in size so that it doesn’t overwhelm the camera. That then helps me to bring a greater amount of specificity to the work onstage. Then, because of my stage roles or the television roles, I can bring more character work into my concerts. When I do master classes, I say to my students, you’ve got to have a reason for singing. You’re not just up there making a pretty sound. All the wants and needs and desires of the character, why they are singing this word, this note at this moment—it all has to have meaning.

All those roles inform my concert work. And the freedom of the concert work will inform the freedom that I need when I’m on television. And so as

PHOTOGRAPHS: CLOCKWISE TOP LEFT, JOAN MARCUS; JEMAL COUNTES/GETTY IMAGES, BRUCE GLIKAS/FILMMAGIC/GETTY IMAGES

disparate as they may seem, they all for me inform each other.

At Juilliard, you were torn between musicals and opera. You seem to have found a way to just do both, and more, rather than have to choose.

I think it's because I'm just hyperactive. I'm interested in too many different things. So I just haven't said no to myself. That's not necessarily a good thing, but I know myself artistically well enough to know that it's fulfilling for me.

The reason I got into concert work is because Michael Tilson Thomas [internationally lauded conductor and Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony] wrote a letter that sat on somebody's desk for a long time before it got to me, saying, "Hey, I think you're kinda great. I've seen you in a couple Broadway shows. I'd love to have you come and sing with the San Francisco Symphony at Carnegie Hall for our opening night, 1998. You'd be singing Gershwin, 'Porgy and Bess.' And I don't know if you'd feel comfortable with that, but I think you'd be great." And I read that, and I was going, "Well, that sounds scary—but it's Michael Tilson Thomas—but I'm just a Broadway singer now—but, OK, yeah, maybe I'll do it!" You know? Just *go for it*.

When I met you, you were very much one of the troupe. Does that kind of camaraderie get harder to find as you become more of a star?

Oh, it's so necessary. It takes an absolute village to put on a show. You may be like "Hey, I'm the diva out here singin' in front," but you have to have great people turning on the lights or costuming you well or throwing those costumes on you in time so that you can get there or giving you great words to say or music to sing—or the whole enterprise falls apart.

Maybe because I grew up in dinner theater and we were all part of the entire enterprise. You had to strike your own sets, help make your costumes, all that stuff. I've never been in a position where I thought, "Well, all of this just lives to serve me." We all live to serve the piece.

Everybody has to come to that theater eight times a week and do that job. I learned from people like Zoe Caldwell when we were in "Master Class." [Ms. Caldwell and Ms. McDonald both won Tonys for their performances in the 1995 play. Ms. Caldwell died in February 2020, after this interview.] We toured that show before we came to New York and she always knew the name of every usher, she knew the name of the doormen, she knew all the crew's names. Zoe makes everybody feel like that they are

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just as important as she is—that's exactly what she believes. That was a good example for me early on.

Have you ever thought about directing?

Every once in a while, it crosses my mind. But then I think about how difficult it is. I've worked with some amazing directors. There's a lot of—I don't want to say "babysitting," but there's a lot of caretaking that goes into it. And I think, until I have all my children out of my house, that's something that I don't think I would have the bandwidth to do. As much as I think it would be fulfilling, until I am not called upon to be a caretaker on a daily basis at home, I don't think I have the energy to do it.

Are there productions that you think directors should undertake? Roles you'd like to play?

I would love to do a gender bend on the musical "Sweeney Todd" and play Sweeney [a murderous barber]. I think it would be a wild challenge.

And then there's the work I've done with young and up-and-coming composers and lyricists. Producers need to take a chance on more people of color—more women even. There's the whole trans community that, as we see—I mean, look at what Janet Mock [American writer, TV host, director, producer and transgender rights activist] has done. We need as much representation as we possibly can.

I would love to see what roles and stories come out of those segments of the population when they are given the opportunity and financial ability to be produced and shown on a large stage. Like "Slave Play" [the hit play that premiered in 2018]. Look at what ["Slave Play" playwright] Jeremy O. Harris has done. He's basically a kid right out of Yale, and look what we've got because of his work and because of commercial producers taking a chance on bringing this very provocative work to Broadway.

With all this going on, is there anything like a typical day for you?

Nope! [Stressing every word:] *Not even a little bit!* Every day is different, especially because my husband is also a performer and an actor [Will Swenson, featured in Broadway shows "Hair," "Les Misérables" and "Waitress"]. I mean, you and I were talking about "what's the calculus"—every day here is "What's the calculus for today? How do we get through today? Oh, we were gonna be home for the next week, and you just got a job offer to go off to Vancouver for six months? Well, OK! We'll figure that out too!" So yeah, two actors and being parents, there is no typical day. The typical day is chaos. ♦