

It's time for Pitre to take on Gypsy

The singer and actor, with her soaring voice, would be perfect for the Broadway show to finally be staged in Toronto



Portrait of stage actress Louise Pitre who wowed the audience in a number from *Gypsy*, *Some People*, at Theatre 20. (TANNIS TOOHEY / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

By **MARTIN KNELMAN** Entertainment

Fri., May 13, 2011

Curtain up! Light the lights!

Here she is, world! Here's Louise!

It was just a brief interlude, but when Louise Pitre took the stage at the Panasonic Theatre earlier this week to sing "Some People" from *Gypsy*, the result was an electrifying and unforgettable showstopper.

Pitre was just one of many performers on the bill for a one-nighter called "The Story Begins: Celebrating Songs From Story-Driven Musicals", presented by Theatre 20 — a new group struggling to be born, with a focus on developing original Canadian musicals. But I felt sorry for others who had to follow her act.

For many aficionados of Broadway musicals, *Gypsy* is the greatest show of them all, even if it has never come close to the popular success of *The Sound of Music* or *The Phantom of the Opera*.

With her version of "Some People" — introduced by Ethel Merman in the original 1959 production — Pitre didn't just sing. She acted, she bristled, and she conveyed all the drive, contempt, ambition and resentment that made Rose (mother of Baby June and her sister Louise, later to become June Havoc and Gypsy Rose Lee) the scariest, most monstrous backstage mother of them all.

"Some People" isn't as familiar as "Everything's Coming Up Roses" or "Rose's Turn" but it's a powerful number in which Rose expresses her dream of escaping from humdrum small-town life and making a vaudeville star of Baby June. And it's a perfect vehicle for Pitre's explosive vocal and dramatic gifts.

At 54, Pitre has been a major presence in Toronto for decades, going back to *Les Misérables* and *Piaf*. Lately, we haven't seen enough of her. But you can catch her at the St. Lawrence Centre on June 1, when she does a concert that will be used to create her next CD.

Pitre's too-brief appearance this week left me intoxicated but perplexed. How long will Toronto audiences have to wait for a great full-scale revival of *Gypsy*? And why hasn't Pitre become the big internationally acclaimed star she should have after her 2002 Tony-nominated triumph in *Mamma Mia*?

While groaning through the 2005 movie *Mamma Mia!*, I wished we were watching Pitre instead of the excruciatingly miscast Meryl Streep. As Woody Allen said about *What's New Pussycat* (a movie he wrote but did not direct or control), if they'd listened to me, they could have made it twice as good and half as successful.

In 2009, Pitre was scheduled to play Rose for a short run in a concert production of *Gypsy* at Barrie's Talk Is Free Theatre to be directed by Richard Ouzounian. The project was delayed when Pitre was cast in *The Toxic Avenger*, ill-advisedly produced by Dancap at the Music Hall. Plans to do *Gypsy* later dwindled away.

Pitre has good company on the list of powerhouse women who yearned to play Rose but didn't. Recently Stephen Sondheim — who wrote the lyrics for *Gypsy* (with music by Jule Styne) — thwarted plans for a new movie starring Barbra Streisand.

At 65, Streisand may be a tad too old to play Rose, just as she was too young for the 1969 movie version of *Hello, Dolly!* But it might have been a perfect exit for her career.

Tom Hooper, the Oscar-winning director of *The King's Speech* was ready to sign on. And it would be an act of mercy to remake the appalling 1962 big-screen version with Rosalind Russell. (I would also prefer to forget the entirely too adorable 1994 TV version, even though Bette Midler won an Emmy for it.)

The late Arthur Laurents, who wrote the book for *Gypsy* (and directed the most recent Broadway revival in 2008), was the rights holder, and he had given his blessing to the Streisand movie. But Laurents — who died last week at age 93 — was talked out of it by Sondheim.

In March, Laurents told the *Hartford Courier* that Sondheim feared the Streisand movie would become the definitive version of record, which might have discouraged future stage revivals.

Sondheim told Laurents that the theatre's greatest essence is that it's ephemeral. He didn't want a definitive production. He preferred to keep *Gypsy* alive, with the prospect of future revivals.

Broadway has had five productions. Three of the stars won the Tony playing Rose — Angela Lansbury (1975), Tyne Daly (1990) and Patti LuPone (2008). Though her performance is one of the most legendary in Broadway history, Merman lost the Tony to her friend Mary Martin (for *The Sound of Music*). Also a losing nominee was Bernadette Peters in 2003.

Both Merman and Lansbury did the show in Toronto, but none of the last three Broadway revivals have come here. Meanwhile there have been less than triumphant productions at the Stratford Festival (1993) and the Shaw Festival (2005).

It's time to play it again. And if there were justice in showbiz, everything would be coming up Louise.

mknelman@thestar.ca