

Louise Pitre Opens a New Window in 'Mame' At Goodspeed

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Louise Pitre is getting verklempt as she talks about what she will be wearing as the sophisticated, glamorous Mame Dennis in the **Goodspeed Opera House** revival of the musical "Mame."

She wore '70s bell-bottomed jumpsuits when she starred in the ABBA-themed Broadway smash, "Mamma, Mia!," a role that earned the Canadian actress a **Tony Award** nomination in 2002.

But in "Mame" which opens Wednesday, May 9 at the East Haddam theater, the 55-year-old silver-haired Pitre (pronounced "PEE-trah") wears some smashing outfits, designed by Gregg Barnes who received a Tony Award nomination for the costumes in the Broadway revival of "Follies."

ADVERTISING

"I'll tell you," Pitre says over lunch at the Gelston House next to the theater, "when you're a little girl playing with your Barbie, you dream of such clothes. And there you are being dressed in Gregg Barnes' fabulous costumes, each one more beautiful than the last, and it's just too much. I am just overwhelmed. I think, 'It can't all be for me. It makes no sense, It's crazy.' I don't know if I will ever again be dressed so sumptuously in a show."

Pitre wipes her eyes and makes light of her emotional state just after a run-through rehearsal of the show's second act.

"I love clothes," she says. "I *love* clothes. If you ask me what I was wearing at any event in the past 35 years I could probably tell you. That's what matters to me, good clothes — and good food, good music, good wine. And if the wine is really fine, I open a second bottle and say, 'Dammit, let's drink it!'"

But she is not just a lover of high-end luxuries.

"I run the gamut from champagne and designer clothes to burgers and beer," she says. "I love the extremes and that to me is what sophistication is, to be able to feel totally at ease in all environments. Mame is so open and sure of what it is she wants to see happening in her life. She is the ultimate life-affirming force of nature. I find her irresistible."

Touchstones

Pitre's embrace of life-as-a-banquet-with-fashion-accessories is in the glamorous spirit of the joie de vivre character she is playing. Mame Dennis was first brought to life on stage in 1956, in the 1958 film starring **Rosalind Russell** in "Auntie Mame," and in the 1966 Broadway musical with **Angela Lansbury**.

. When Pitre starred in "**Mamma Mia!**" at the Winter Garden Theatre she inherited the dressing room Lansbury had used. Pitre was also given the rolling pin Lansbury used in "Sweeney Todd" by a staffer from that show when Pitre played Mrs. Lovett in a Canadian production for the Calgary Opera Company. She brought the rolling pin, now a treasured keepsake, to East Haddam for "Mame."

"It's the most difficult role to cast," says the musical's composer **Jerry Herman** during a phone interview from his home in Los Angeles. "It's much more difficult than Dolly [in 'Hello, Dolly!'] to cast. Mame is tricky because for me she has to have, first and foremost, innate elegance. She also has to have charisma and charm and you have to immediately like this lady. You can't hide that with acting.

"Second, she really has to sing because there are a lot of songs she sings that should give you [goose bumps]. Lastly, she has to have a special sense of humor. Humor is so important. Having all of these qualities is quite a lot to ask of any one woman."

Aunt Alice

Pitre says she understands Mame's heart and spirit.

She had an Auntie Mame in her life, too — a great aunt named Alice Pitre who was single, smoked elegant cigarettes and traveled. She entranced her great niece with stories of her adventures around the world.

"There's definite chunk of her in my flair, my love of the luxurious and a little bit of flash," Louis Pitre says.

She didn't start out that way. Pitre was studying to be an arts teacher at the University of Western Ontario, but a stint in a musical revue in her senior year made her change direction.

"I worried about what my parents would say," she says. "My mother was disappointed because she knew what I was heading into and that it was not steady work. But my parents never held it against me and supported me never-the-less and for that I'm forever grateful."

She says they finally felt secure in their daughter's career when Pitre played Fantine in the Toronto production of "**Les Misérables**." "They were sitting in the third row center on opening night and I took my bow directly at them. That was such a big moment for me, to look at them and say, 'Look, they're liking me. I'm doing OK. It's going to be fine.'"

Her eyes start to well up again.

"I remember their faces still. I never got that chance again to do that again."

Pitre's father soon slipped into Alzheimer's. "He could not come to see me in New York for 'Mamma Mia!' He didn't know who I was by then." Her mother, she says, is also headed down a similar path. Pitre says an opening for her mother at a long, sought-after health care center in Canada happened on the day after she was offered the Goodspeed role. Without the comfort of knowing that her mother was being well-looked after, she says, she could not have accepted her "dream role."

"Mamma Mia!"

The chance to play Donna Sheridan, the stressed-out mother in "Mamma Mia!", super-sized Pitre's career. She was a star in Canada, with leading roles over the years in "Piaf," "Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living In Paris," and "Blood Brothers." She also was a draw on the concert stage.

She was cast in the lead role in "Mamma Mia!" for the North American premiere in Toronto. A tour of that production would follow. Meanwhile, the same creative team was mounting a separate Broadway production. When the tour launched in San Francisco Pitre received a call that the producers and creators of the show decided she should play the role in New York.

The musical opened on Broadway a month after Sept. 11, 2011. "[The producers] considered postponing the opening [after the terrorist attacks] but then thought, 'No, this show is the type of show that should be opening now'."

Pitre says of the experience in those early months of the run: "I don't think I've ever felt more loved by an audience. You wouldn't believe the people who were at the stage door after every show. My god, people were rushing me, crying, hugging saying, Thank you'."

Her eyes start to fill again. "My god, I'm a mess, crying every two minutes."

Pitre says she never quite understood what made the musical such an international phenomenon at the time she was performing. "When you're in something you never get the chance to sit back and get that rush that the audience is feeling."

When she was invited back last year for the 10th anniversary of the Broadway production — that is still running after more than 4,300 performances — she got it.

"I was blown away. And that cast was so good. It was better than I remember ours being, I kid you not. And I thought,'You know what? I get it.' Even if it's not your cup of tea, you have to say, 'This is really a well-put together show. It's good. It works. So now I know. Better late than never.'"

Pitre says she connects with "Mame" in a deeply personal way.

In a [People Magazine](#) interview 10 years ago she said: "It took so long to be happy in my life. I'm not going to waste any time. I live for today."

That sounds like a song cue from "Mame."

"And it's still true," she says when reminded of her earlier words. "Yes, there are things I'm sure you can't change in life. But I think you can bloody well influence things, too, depending on how you look at things, it's true and you mean it. You go for it."

MAME is now in previews and opens Wednesday at the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam. The show will play through July 7. Performances are Wednesdays and Thursdays at 2 and 7:30 p.m.; Fridays at 8 p.m.; Saturdays at 3 and 8 p.m and Sundays at 2 and 6:30 p.m. Information: 860-873-8668 and <http://www.goodspeed.org>.

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