

# **An update on celebrated Dominican Darrel Toulon & Friends benefits concert for Dominica held in Austria**

## **THE EVENT UPDATE PROVIDED BY DARREL TOULON:-**

On Tuesday 12 December 2017 hundreds came together at the Orpheum Theatre in Graz, Austria, to raise funds to help the Princess Margaret Hospital on the beautiful island of Dominica, devastated during Hurricane Maria in September.

The event, organised by Dominican homeboy, former Ballet Director of Opera Graz and Internationally renowned choreographer **Darrel Toulon**, brought together over 40 artistes from across Europe, India and the Americas to help raise much needed money to help rebuild the Princess Margaret Hospital that was devastated along with the rest of the island.

The hospital continues to care for the residents of the island in exceptionally difficult circumstances as the community strives to rebuild the island and its infrastructure. The hospital was badly hit during the hurricane and much of its building and equipment was damaged or destroyed including the Blood Bank and vital lifesaving neonatal equipment in the premature baby unit.

Artistic Director Darrel Toulon conceived a Programme using Photographs, Video and Sound Clips of Dominica before, after and **during** the Category 5 Hurricane with carefully selected songs, music and dance, interpreted by an impressive line-up of Personalities who were assembled in Graz exclusively for this occasion.

Honorary patron for the event was Parliamentary President of the State of Styria Dr. Bettina Vollath who shared the opening Address with Darrel Toulon. Also present as distinguished Guest was Municipal Minister of Culture Dr. Günter Riegler, representing the Mayor of Graz Mr. Siegfried Nagl – who welcomed the public with a Dominican Rum Punch Reception.

The heavy red velvet Curtains parted slowly to the sound of a Mobile-Phone voice message sent out to the Dominican Diaspora from the Village of Pointe Michel in the middle of Hurricane Maria, to reveal 3 Dancers (Challyce Brogdon, Jessica, Moretto, Xianghui Zeng) and Electric-Violinist Boris Michaljic set against 8 Cellists, bathed in a deep blue light. Puerto Rican Soprano Melba Ramos then sang the soaring aria “Bachianas Brasileiras” by Heitor Villa-Lobos, while Rumanian Tenor Alexandru Badea brought the house down with “Nessun Dorma”.

Here was a dedication by Andrea Huber to the Island that she visited some years ago: “Somewhere over the Rainbow” in a very personal jazzy rendition, which segued into “You’ll Never Walk Alone”, accompanied by Donald Books on Piano. Andrea sang about hope and longing, interspersed with her personal recollections of visiting Dominica and meeting the Toulon family. “You are connected to Dominica now, and I am sure we will see each other again.” As she relived the last moments with Paul, Andrea also quoted Ernest Hemmingway: “For what are we born if not to aid one another?”

Books then teamed up with Martin Fournier whose crystalline soul-filled “Maria” (from West Side Story) was interpolated with clips of a Dominican Woman lamenting the night-long horror as she prayed that no lives be lost. Quite a highlight of the Gala, Bernstein and Sondheim’s lyrics: “the most beautiful sound I ever heard, Maria, Maria, Maria...” took on a totally different dimension, harrowing as heard and experienced in this context, now in dialogue with footage of the devastation in the villages of Soufriere and Scotts Head.

Each one of the audience was touched by the stories told in song and dance as residents of the island shared their personal stories of devastation, hope and triumph via film with the live acts unfolding in the Orpheum, and as the visually arresting Natural beauty of Dominica became a leading player onstage.

The second half of the Evening was an explosion of High-octane Gospel, Soul and Power-Ballads. The life-affirming “Window of Hope” in its powerful delivery from Carole Alston was matched in intensity by Previn Moore’s “Don’t Let The Sun Go Down On Me”.

Marialena Fernandes took to the Piano in a solo tour-de-force as she dedicated some Folk-Songs from her home country of Goa India. “As an Indian living in Vienna, I know what it’s like to feel unable to do something against a tragedy happening back home. This time it hit Dominica. I feel honoured to be here, and hope with all my heart that together we are playing a role in rebuilding the Island”

Dominica’s very own **Sade Bully** was Special Guest, who appeared in a stirring Dance Solo which she choreographed herself. Backed up by Live Band with String Quartet (Musical Direction: Maurizio Nobili) and the brilliant vocals of Elisabeth Sikora – Sade’s “Up Against The Wind” broke its mould, releasing her rooted energy to fill the auditorium. In the following interview with Toulon who was also Conferencier of the Evening, Sade Bully recreated the interrupted telephone calls with her parents while Hurricane Maria was wrecking its damage on Dominica, and her subsequent determined effort in getting on the Island “by the first boat out of St. Lucia” – providing the Graz Audience with the genuine emotional punch of first-person experience.

There was more pure dance set to Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong (Cuban-born Miguel Rodriguez Hernandez and partner Laura Cristea from BallettVorpommern in Germany) and Händel (Astrid Julen and Daniel Meyers from Opera Graz), as well as Purcell (Andressa Miyazato and Jonatan Salgado Romero from Tanz Linz).

In contrasting moods the audience watched, listened, cried and sang along with other diverse acts such as throbbing underground sound of Rock Band “The Base”, and Andreas Woyke & Friedrich Kleinhapl’s virtuostic and fiery interpretation of Piazzolla’s “Grand Tango”. Vesna Petkovic (Serbia), Carin Filipic and Anna Fay lent their voices for gutsy and committed songs and anthems of solidarity (“We’re All In This Together” & “From A Distance”) and defiance in the face of a storm “Glass of Love” – making it impossible to single out a highlight in this revue of superlatives.

After a Message of Support from Afro-Asiatic Institute, Director Johannes Mindler-Steiner, the evening ended with the uplifting “starting all over again, it’s going to be tough for us... It’s going to be rough for us. But we’re going to make it.” As all Singers joined in the refrain, the full Cast of DARREL TOULON & FRIENDS stood shoulder to shoulder crowding the entire apron of the Stage of the Orpheum to receive the Standing Ovarions from an ecstatic Audience.

In the VIP Lounge were members and representatives of the Graz Political, Industry, Cultural and Social Sectors including Sanlas, AVL, My World Solutions, Schullin, Bankhaus Krentschker, Energie Steiermark, Scoop and Spoon, Revita, Eckstein, Radio Sound Portal, Kleine Zeitung, Graz Holding, Macello, Kirchenwirt, Wegraz, and Ardea-Luh designer duo Elke Steffen-Kühnl and Babsi Schneider who were responsible for the attire of Darrel Toulon and Sade Bully.

As the Backstage After-Show Party went on way past midnight, Darrel Toulon thanked the remaining crowd of Sponsors, Audience, Well-Wishers, and fellow-Artistes for bringing this Venture to its climax with a vocal rendition reserved for the final hour. Together with Maurizio Nobili on the Piano, and this time un-plugged: “God Bless The Child That’s Got His Own” proved to be however only a kick-off for another impromptu jam session as Carole Alston, Previn Moore, Marialena Fernandes, and many others, unable to stop the flow of energy released as a great wave of community feeling took over.

The intent is for the proceeds of the Event which is currently over **30,000€**, to be presented to the Princess Margaret Hospital to be put urgently to use.

The event took place with the kind cooperation of Grazer Spielstätten, and the Afro-Asian Institute, under the Honorary Patronage of Dr. Bettina Vollath and the endorsement from the Dominica High Commission in London.

The Sound Files, Video Clips and Images used in this Production were provided by kind cooperation of the Dominica High Commission, free-lance Journalist Anna von Boetticher, and Irvin Durand CEO of Caribbean Performance Arts Federation.

All Artistes agreed to contribute their Performances for free.

The Organisation Team for the Benefit Gala was spearheaded by Kathryn List, Andrea Huber, Bostjan Ivanjsic.

Text: Birgit Amlinger, Anna Röckl, Julia Zirkler

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