

# Weekend



## Music goes to the Max with jazzy sounds of vocalist Nnenna Freelon

By Stephen Bitsoli  
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Jazz fans can find a terrific little jazz club in the midst of the home of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. About once a month, Detroit's Max M. Fisher Music Center turns its Music Box venue into the intimate Jazz Club @ The Max, with cabaret seating, a bar and buffet.

Tonight, Jazz Club @ The Max opens with two shows by jazz vocalist Nnenna Freelon and the Professors of Jazz at MSU.

"Nnenna is a sensation," said Kendra Whitelock, director of Pops and Specials for the Max M. Fisher Music Center. "She's such a great talent that the Count Basie Orchestra practically (made her a member). She has an amazing voice."

Of the Music Box, Whitelock added, "It has a laid-back atmosphere. It's a good space to see her."

In a phone interview from her North Carolina home, Freelon discussed her career.

"I started singing in church (in Cambridge, Mass.) when I was very young," Freelon said. She fondly remembers dancing around her father's feet while he played Big Band jazz records, but "It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized that what I wanted to do with my life was music."

Before that realization, she became a health care administrator, but said "Somehow I always found myself in the patients' rooms singing."

So, in her mid-20s, though married with three children, Freelon started to explore singing and develop her voice.

She wasn't an overnight success. "I became very slowly a person who was well known in the local scene," she said, then "queen of the local scene," but she wasn't known outside of the local scene.

Then she had an opportunity to become a visiting artist for the state of North Carolina. "It was a state job," she said, as an



Nnenna Freelon

"artistic resource for the community." Each of North Carolina's 100 counties has its own artist, Freelon said, ranging from singers to quilters, and they exchange them. "I was in that program for four years. It was a very rich experience."

Then, in the early '90s, she attended a regional conference where Ellis Marsalis, father of Branford and Wynton, heard her sing, which led to her first recording contract and to touring.

She's released nine recordings to date, including 2005's "Blueprint of a Lady: Sketches of Billie Holiday," and performed several times in the Detroit area, including at couple of Detroit jazz festivals, the Detroit Institute of Arts and Orchestra Hall.

Freelon said what she wants is "a long, interesting career that allows me to do this thing I love. I relish the opportunity to stretch musically."

Another stretch coming up this year is scoring her first film. "I'll be composing," Freelon said. "I'm over the moon (about it)."

The Max M. Fisher Music Center is located at 3711 Woodward Ave. in Detroit. Tickets for Nnenna Freelon with the Professors of Jazz at MSU, 8 and 10 p.m. today, are \$20. For tickets or more information, visit [www.detroit-symphony.org](http://www.detroit-symphony.org) or call (313) 576-5111.



## Battle for 'Respect'

Three-time Tony Award winner and "Dreamgirls" star Hinton Battle, from left, directs Sarah Madej, Marlyn Sanchez, and Shonka Dukureh, in "Respect: A Musical Journey of Women," opening Wednesday at the Gem Theatre in Detroit.

## 'A Musical Journey of Women' opens at the Gem

By Andrea Nobile-Westfall  
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Hinton Battle's resume boasts a role in the Oscar-nominated "Dreamgirls," three Tony Awards for acting, choreography for films such as the 2006 hip-hop/swing musical "Idlewild," plus a dancing gig in the musical episode of television's "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." So why is the multi-faceted performer in Detroit?

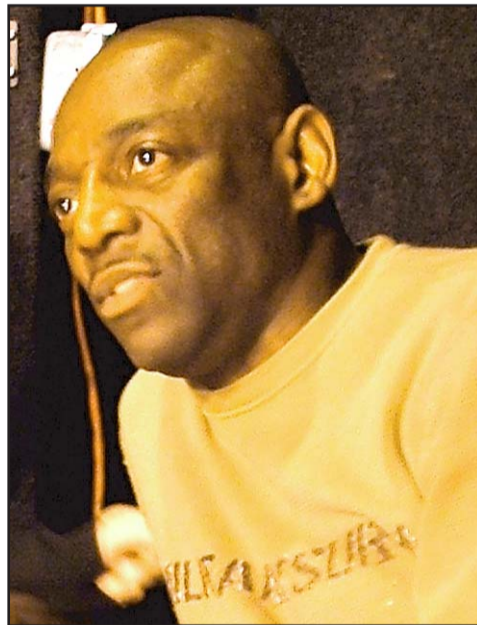
Battle is directing "Respect: A Musical Journey of Women," opening Wednesday at the city's Gem Theatre for an open-ended run.

The four-woman show, written by Dr. Dorothy Marcic based on her book "Respect: Women and Popular Music," combines the gender's own stories of love, loss, career and more with excerpts from 64 Top 40 songs performed by a local three-piece band. Expect era-spanning hits such as "I Will Survive," "Someone to Watch Over Me," "These Boots are Made for Walking" and many more.

"These are great, classic songs," Battle said, back in Detroit after attending the Screen Actors Guild awards Jan. 28 in Los Angeles.

While "Respect" has been staged in Orlando, Cleveland and Boston, the Detroit show features its own arrangements, costumes, choreography and sets.

"If you're doing regional theater, that's where the creative stuff is being done.



Hinton Battle

The community (here) supports that, and it's great," he said.

The New York resident's career goes back more than 25 years to a role as the Scarecrow in 1975's "The Wiz" on Broadway, a part played by Michael Jackson in the 1978 film adaptation.

Since then, Battle has completed Broadway

turns in "The Tap Dance Kid," "Sophisticated Ladies," "Miss Saigon" and even "Dreamgirls," in which he played James "Thunder" Early. It's the part that's earned Oscar-nominee Eddie Murphy both Golden Globe and SAG awards.

With a past firmly planted in theater, Battle made a conscious decision a few years ago to stop limiting himself to that genre.

And he's happily taking advantage of the current musical revival.

"It's been a long journey to get the musical back, and back in the mainstream. I think the timing is right," he said.

As Wayne in "Dreamgirls," he is one of only two actors from the original Broadway cast to appear in the film as well. While it's a smaller role—he is assistant to Jamie Foxx's character—he was thrilled to get it.

"Let it be known that I don't care what role it is. I just want to be involved in it." This is a history-making film," he said.

After launching "Respect" at the Gem, Battle will travel to North Carolina to choreograph "Bolden!," a new movie musical based on the life of jazz musician Buddy Bolden.

"I prefer the entertainment field. I love it all. I really like doing it all," he said.

"Respect: A Musical Journey of Women" opens Feb. 7 at the Gem Theatre, 333 Madison Ave. in Detroit. Tickets are \$39.50, with special discounts for Girls Night Out groups of 10 or more. For tickets, call (313) 963-9800.

## Elizabeth Reaser: 'Sweet Land' star gets her 'Spirit' from indie films

By Kurt Anthony Krug  
Journal Register News Service

The best acting experiences Bloomfield Hills native Elizabeth Reaser has had are working in independent movies. Her role in "Sweet Land" earned the 31-year-old a nomination for an Independent Spirit Award for Best Actress. The film, co-starring Ned Beatty and Tim Guinee, plays exclusively at the AMC Forum 30 in Sterling Heights starting today.

"Just to be nominated is a huge deal for me," says Reaser, who lives in Los Angeles. "Even though I loved doing 'The Family Stone' (the 2005 dramedy with Sarah Jessica Parker, Diane Keaton, Claire Danes and Rachel McAdams), my greatest roles have been in independent films."

In "Sweet Land," Reaser plays Inge, a young German woman mistakenly thought to be a World War I refugee. She comes to a small Minnesota farming community to see her future husband,



ELIZABETH REASER

Olaf (Guinee). Many factors prevent their marriage, including the language barrier (Inge can't speak English), proper documentation and community unrest. Overcoming these obstacles alienates them from the community, leaving them to harvest their crop alone. Despite that, the two fall in love.

"I had always wanted to do a pe-

riod love story — just a really big, sweeping, romantic, pure story and that's what this is," she says during an interview at the Townsend Hotel in Birmingham.

A 1993 alumna of Avondale High School in Auburn Hills, Reaser was involved in the drama club there. She graduated from The Julliard School in 1999

with her undergraduate degree in drama.

"She called herself a theater geek," recalls her father John Reaser. "Before she could drive, I used to take her to Rochester Hills for voice lessons. I thought it'd be wonderful if she bought into it — I just had no idea that she'd be this successful."

Director Ali Selim cast Reaser nine days prior to principal photography. It took 18 days to film her role, but she worked nonstop, putting in 14- to 16-hour days, seven days a week. She didn't get much sleep during the shoot.

And Reaser had to learn German and Norwegian phonetically.

"It was insane," she says. "Thankfully, I want to (Julliard) so I have worked phonetically. I've done a lot of voice work, so I had the technique. I really just had to hustle and transcribe this stuff phonetically."

When Selim wasn't filming, Reaser rehearsed the next day's scenes and practiced German

and Norwegian.

"It was really all-encompassing," she explains. "When I wasn't speaking another language, I had to speak English with a German/Norwegian kind of accent. We just were constantly rehearsing. Tim is just the hardest-working actor I've ever met. He's the co-creator."

But Reaser was nervous sharing the screen with veteran actor Beatty.

"He's a powerhouse. He's so brilliant. I was really scared at first, but he was just this sweetest, nicest man," she says. "You don't really have to do anything when you act with him. I felt all I really had to do was show up and listen to them, pay attention and just be in the moment. They're so wonderful that they did all the work for me."

Despite the challenges she faced with "Sweet Land," Reaser considers it her proudest body of work.

"The thing I loved most about it

is that (Selim) had the confidence to use actors who aren't names. He gave me an opportunity. Now that I've been nominated for an Independent Spirit Award, I feel so happy because he took such a huge risk in casting me."

Reaser was recently seen in an episode of "Standoff" and the short-lived TNT drama "Saved." She is appearing in two other independent films this year — "Purple Violets," co-starring Southfield native Selma Blair, and "Puccini for Beginners," with Gretchen Mol.

But her biggest news is a 9-episode stint on ABC's hit medical drama "Grey's Anatomy," beginning this month. Reaser couldn't reveal anything about her role, not even her character's name, but she's excited about being on the series, which she considers the "best series on TV, hands down."

"Sweet Land" opens today at the AMC Forum Theater in Sterling Heights; see review on Page 2B.



## Girlfriends Getaway

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