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Bob McClenahan

San Francisco native and Emmy-winning actor Darren Criss tackled classic show tunes and covered a dizzying array of artists.

In Napa, birds really do fly 'Over the Rainbow'

By Zack Ruskin

Broadway star and "Glee" actor Darren Criss is the latest star to make a compelling case for staging more musical theater events outdoors.

Performing against a backdrop of pink skies and rolling vineyards on Friday, July 28, the San Francisco native and Emmy-winning actor was exceptionally charismatic as he tackled classic show tunes and covered a dizzying array of artists.

"Welcome to my wedding," he joked upon taking the small outdoor stage facing several hundred folding chairs. From there, he was off, serving as a one-man jukebox as his selections veered from British alt-rockers Keane to singer-songwriter royalty Carole King. Between sets, Criss peppered in stories from his strange journey to stardom.

Set at Napa's Carneros Resort and Spa, the event was part of the Broadway and Vine series. The brainchild of former Broadway actor Jacob Langfelder, the program is now in its third season of bringing icons from the world of musical theater to sing outdoors in the idyllic confines of Napa Wine Country. The series will continue with concerts from Broadway performers Sutton Foster at Peju Winery on Wed-

Winery offers Broadway star a fertile setting for intimate concert

nesday, Aug. 2, Erika Henningsen at the St. Helena venue Tre Posti on Aug. 16, and Natalie Tenenbaum at the Lawn at the Estate Yountville on Aug. 17.

The events, which also include a pre-show wine tasting and an optional post-show three-course dinner, are run entirely on a volunteer basis as a means of supporting local school programs. This support includes special classroom visits from top performers like Criss while they're in town.

The intimate outdoor concert provided a perfect opportunity for Criss, best known for the five seasons he spent playing Blaine Anderson on the popular Fox series "Glee," to formulate a set list that doubled as an autobiography of sorts.

At one point, he introduced a cover of "The Luckiest" by Ben Folds by explaining that he'd originally intended for it to be his character's last song on "Glee." It's hard to say Criss

made the wrong choice, given the original number he ultimately wrote ("This Time") would earn him an Emmy nomination in 2015. But his take on Folds' lovelorn ballad, played at the piano, was a breathtaking glimpse into what might have been.

Later, he dusted off "To Have a Home," which a small subset of the audience may have recognized as one of the songs Criss penned for a Harry Potter parody musical he made with friends back in 2009. It was a gesture of appreciation to an audience built from many factions of fandoms. By the end of the night, Criss had done an admirable job of catering to as many of them as possible.

Alternating between piano and guitar, he managed to imbue every note with a lively joy, be it a take on Tom Petty, his version of "Grease" torch song "Hopelessly Devoted to You," or his spot-on Kermit the

Frog impression. He even invited fans to make requests of songs his character did on "Glee," which he then compiled into an improvised medley for his encore.

But the moment that best encapsulated the evening was watching Criss belt a faithful rendition of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" as real birds flew past him and merrily chirped away into a backdrop of the Napa Valley sunset.

And yet, there was another highlight that may have topped it all, this one in the form of an unexpected guest.

As part of the series, each Broadway and Vine show typically includes a duet or group performance where local students are given a chance to sing alongside their idols. On Friday night, Criss welcomed Amarech Mendez, a 17-year-old student at Mercy High School in Burlingame, to cover Bob Dylan's "Make You Feel My Love."

Arranged in the style of pop singer Adele's recent rendition, the presence of Mendez was clearly no favor but a well-earned honor as she belted out her parts with impressive conviction. It was a moment that instantly reminded Susana Gonzalez, 57, of the time her own daughter, Diana, now a student at Stanford, was in-

Criss continues on B10

Broadway and Vine: Sutton Foster, 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 2. \$95-\$395. Peju Winery, 8466 St. Helena Hwy., Rutherford. • Erika Henningsen, 5:30 p.m. Aug. 16. \$95-\$345. Tre Posti, 641 Main St., St. Helena. • Natalie Tenenbaum, 5:30 p.m. Aug. 17. \$25-\$245. The Lawn at the Estate Yountville, 6481 Washington St., Yountville. broadwayandvine.org



During his performance, Darren Criss welcomed Amarech Mendez, a 17-year-old student, to the stage.

CRISS

From page B7

vited to sing a duet with musical theater star Shoshana Bean in 2021 as part of the Broadway and Vine series' first season.

"This is a real gift," Gonzalez said. "Jacob is an ambassador, not only to the community but to the kids. It allows them to dream and think about the fact that they can do anything. I mean, where else do you get a performer singing 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' and get actual birds?"

Nic Meerholz, 40, of Napa, was also impressed with the show, which should be welcome news to Criss, who saw Meerholz's hand go up twice early in the evening when

he asked if anyone in attendance "didn't give an eff about musical theater" and was "dragged here by their partner and has no idea what's happening."

Criss thanked Meerholz for his honesty and dedicated the rest of the show to making a convert of the man.

At the conclusion of Criss' 16-song set, Meerholz confirmed the artist accomplished his mission.

"I came into the show not knowing anything about musicals or Broadway, and it was just absolutely fantastic," he said, "I didn't even know who Darren was. I've never watched 'Glee.' Nothing. Magical! It was just a magical evening."

Zack Ruskin is a freelance writer.