

# A Question of Honor

"It's a question of honor." Those were the words sung in the recent world concert tour entitled *Harem* by international sensation Sarah Brightman, who performed in Amman in the late summer of 2003 alongside Arab music celebrity, Kadim Al Sahir. By Faisal Al-Juburi

**B**rightman, as many know, used the fame she found playing the ingénue Christine Daae in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* to catapult herself to superstardom in the adult contemporary music world. But, in an interesting yet not unprecedented trend, we increasingly see radio and silver screen stars of our age doing the opposite: entering into the domain of the theater with little or no experience, while using Brightman's aforementioned lyrics as their collective mantra. It is indeed a question of honor, and perhaps ultimately, one of humanity for both the actors and those who flock to see them.

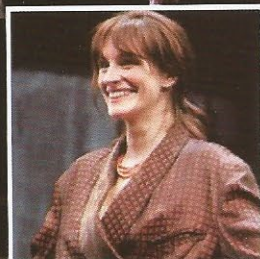
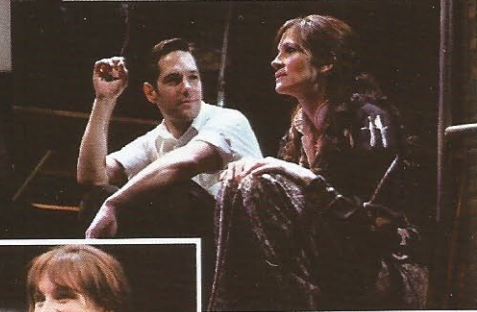
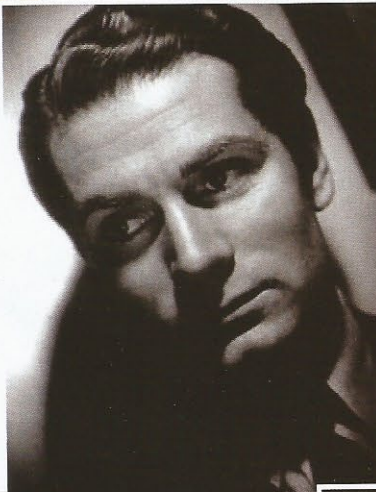
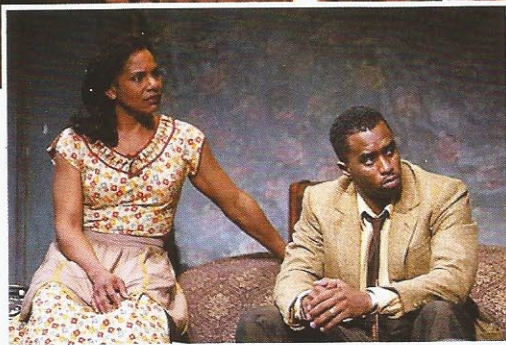
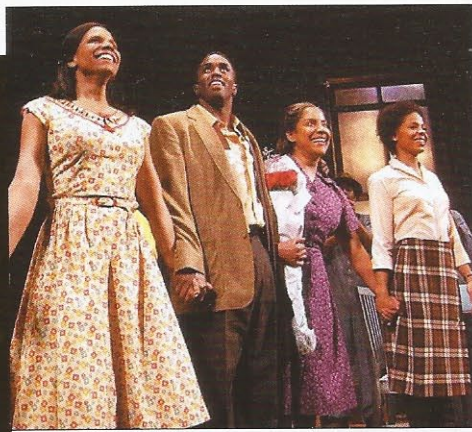
Some, such as famed film star of yesteryear Ali McGraw (remember *Love Story*, anyone?) in David Eldridge's *Festen*, hit

New York's Great White Way or London's West End to revive currently flagging careers. Others, like America's sweetheart Julia Roberts, who recently starred on Broadway in Richard Greenberg's family drama *Three Days of Rain*, need no such resuscitation and leave behind a \$20 million per film cheque for a relatively paltry \$35,000 per week. Most, however, find a common thread that links together their reasons for tackling professional theater: to prove to themselves and their peers that they have the skill to perform in what many deem to be the hardest art form eight times a week, without the luxury of saying "cut" and starting over when a song or scene falls flat.

In addition to Ms. MacGraw and Ms. Roberts, both of whom received less-than-glowing notices in New York, the past few theatrical seasons have seen the equally ill-fated Denzel Washington in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Christian Slater opposite Jessica Lange in Tennes-

see Williams's autobiographical *The Glass Menagerie*, and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs in Lorraine Hansberry's racial drama *A Raisin in the Sun*, as well as the intriguing yet unfulfilled promises of Britney Spears alongside her backup dancer-turned-husband Kevin Federline in *Sweet Charity* and, as rumor has it, Jessica Simpson in *The Pajama Game*, in the role made famous by American treasure Doris Day in the musical's film version. There is, apparently, a feeling of validity that stems from performing each night in front of a sold-out house, a sense of satisfaction that comes from applause, and the undoubtedly all-too-common standing ovation, a tradition once reserved solely for moments of theatrical ecstasy.

In theory, taking the stage brings each actor closer to the likes of Katharine Hepburn and Laurence Olivier; those performers who excelled in every arena and earned the title of "Living Legend". And we, the general public, look on with



morbid curiosity and fascination, ready to cheer for our beloved cultural icons when they succeed, and even more prepared to revel in the delight of their misery when they fail. To exhibit failure, after all, is to become human once again. And, as has often times been noted, Western society in general is one that finds joy in creating idols but perhaps prides itself more on tearing them down.

It is the humanity of it all on the sides of both the actor and the audience that

• The general public look on with morbid curiosity and fascination, ready to cheer for our beloved cultural icons when they succeed and even more prepared to revel in the delight of their misery when they fail •

makes these stage debuts and, if the actors in question are indeed talented or brave, return engagements so appealing. There is the immediacy and the connection between the performer and those who watch, something that is never present in film or on the radio. There is a sense of heightened

reality in the air. And, for those of us who choose to pay the big bucks, there is the opportunity to reaffirm that these celluloid gods and goddesses are in fact real, that they are not figments of our imaginations, and that they, like you and me, are living, breathing creatures. When they seize the day, we rejoice in the idea that our role models succeed once more and that there is the opportunity for a mere mortal to reach supposed perfection. But, when they do not meet the bar that has been set so high by those who came before them, we find instead an eerie sense of solace, knowing that even the fabulous sometimes fall.

And, while the consensus amongst theater critics might be to tell these so-called "Hollywood Hotties" to go home, it is ultimately the theater-going public's desire to spend upwards of one hundred dollars a ticket to see these often times crude science fair projects that keep producers begging and stars acquiescing, hoping beyond hope that their fate in the hands of the critics, their fellow actors, and

most importantly, the audience will be different than that of those who came before, believing that they are, in the end, members of the new generation of Living Legends. ■