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THEATER

A musical gumbo rich in Southern flavors

Tena Clark drew upon her experiences in New Orleans for 'Twist's' soulful music and lyrics.

June 19, 2011 | Sophia Lee

Tena Clark has written and produced hit songs for Dionne Warwick, LeAnn Rimes and Patti LaBelle, been nominated for a Grammy Award ("Way Up There"), founded a company called DMI Music and Media Solutions, and written jingles for McDonald's.

But she says none of those successes compare to her current undertaking, writing the songs for a new American musical, "Twist," which opens next week at the Pasadena Playhouse. The work is an adaptation of Charles Dickens' "Oliver Twist" set in Depression-era New Orleans. Shortly before its opening, Clark was calling it "my legacy piece. I spent love, blood and tears over this."

For The Record

Los Angeles Times Wednesday, June 22, 2011 Home Edition Main News Part A Page 4 News Desk 2 inches; 91 words Type of Material: Correction
 "Twist": An article in the June 19 Arts & Books section contained several errors about the Pasadena Playhouse's new musical "Twist" and songwriter Tena Clark. The show is not a Depression-era musical; it is set during Prohibition in the late 1920s, before the Great Depression. "Twist" did not take 20 years to reach the stage, and last year's production of the show at Atlanta's Alliance Theatre was not its first. Clark became involved with "Twist" in 1983, 10 years before it was first produced at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre in 1993.

For The Record

Los Angeles Times Sunday, June 26, 2011 Home Edition Sunday Calendar Part D Page 3 Calendar Desk 2 inches; 79 words Type of Material: Correction
 Pasadena Playhouse: A June 19 article about the Pasadena Playhouse's new musical "Twist" and songwriter Tena Clark contained several errors. The show is not a Depression-era musical; it is set during Prohibition in the late 1920s. "Twist" did not take 20 years to reach the stage, and last year's production at Atlanta's Alliance Theatre was not its first. Clark became involved with "Twist" in 1983, 10 years before it was first produced at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre in 1993.

"Twist" is not only Clark's first musical, but also a show whose themes and characters hit close to home.

The protagonist is a mulatto orphan in 1928 New Orleans named Twist, the child of an aristocratic white mother and a black song-and-dance man. Though Clark is not biracial, she found herself identifying with Twist's struggle to fit in as a "color no one likes."

She was born in rural Mississippi at a time when blacks and whites still could not drink from the same water fountain. Because her mother worked as songwriter at the Blue Room at the Roosevelt New Orleans Hotel, a nightclub that featured nationally touring performances at the time, she spent much of her childhood in the city and became a vocal sympathizer for civil rights during an age of racial segregation. Because of her sentiments, Clark endured rejection and name-calling in her hometown. "I just never felt like I fit in," she said.

"Twist" took about 20 years to reach the stage. Clark says she was immediately taken with book writer Bill Brown's idea for the show. "The minute I read the treatment, I was bitten," Clark said. "It just reached in and grabbed my heart. And even the whole time I've been writing this score, I didn't know in the beginning that I was pulling on so much of my soul and what I had grown up with."

Clark said she realized how much of the play resonated with her only when she played the first 10 songs for her mother, who passed away 10 years ago.

"My mom heard it and started bawling her eyes out," Clark said. "And I asked her, 'What's wrong?' and she said to me that she felt that the [lyrics] and [the main character Twist's] experiences were almost autobiographical for me."

Clark said she drew from her roots as she wrote for "Twist." In fact, many of the melodies were inspired by the R&B, blues, jazz and soul she used to listen to in New Orleans, as well as the black gospel and spiritual music that her black nanny, Vergie, sang to her.

"I got -- just as you say in New Orleans -- a gumbo of music experiences," Clark said. "I always tell people that I wouldn't have grown up anywhere else but Mississippi and New Orleans because it is just such a great soil where my soul grew."

Twist is currently in previews at the Playhouse. "I've never been one to labor over my pieces," she said. "But there was this one song

For over a year, the missing element to the song (Clark would not say which one) haunted her. Driving or on a plane, Clark kept pondering the word. And then a few weeks ago, inspiration hit during a rehearsal.

"It was like lightning -- BAM!" Clark said. "And then I was like, OK, now I can go to some island somewhere and lie down."

That's the way Clark gets most of her inspiration. Rarely does she sit down in her studio planning to write songs; they just "come" to her at any moment, any place.

"I have to feel something to write it. It's been like that my whole career. I've had successes in many mediums, but I can't just write something to make money or because it's popular. And boy, did I feel this show."

It was Clark who brought "Twist" director-choreographer Debbie Allen to the show. The two are close friends, and together they made the initial casting decisions, with producers Michelle Seward, Willette Klausner, Forbes Candlish, Gary Goddard and Dror Soref weighing in on the final cast.

The first production of "Twist" was held last year at Atlanta's Alliance Theater, and after Pasadena Playhouse, the creative team has high hopes for "Twist" moving on to Broadway.

For Clark, it's more about reaching a bigger audience with its message.

"This show is more than a musical," Clark said. "Of course I want it to go to Broadway. But I want also it to make people go, 'Hm, wow, this kind of puts things in perspective for me.' That is my hope and dream for this show."

But will there be other musicals in the future for Clark?

"Ask me that again after we go to Broadway," Clark said with a laugh. "I really want to see this go all the way first."

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