

'My Mother has 4 Noses'

NYT calls it 'devastating and gorgeous'; at the Kate this weekend

By Lisa Reisman
lisareisman27@gmail.com

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OLD SAYBROOK » In her more lucid moments during her descent into dementia, Jonatha Brooke's mother made one recurring appeal to her daughter.

"Almost daily she would ask, 'Are you getting this down? We should make a play out of it! We could take it to Broadway!'" said the acclaimed singer-songwriter, who will bring her one-woman show to The Kate for three productions over Friday, July 1 and Saturday, July 2.

The result: "My Mother Has 4 Noses," a musical memoir for which the 52-year-old wrote the script, music and lyrics, charting her time caring for her declining mother.

"4 Noses" is an expansion on what the Amherst graduate has been doing since her years as a member of the popular duo "The Story" and later as a solo artist: employing her ringing soprano and her penchant for witty wordplay in songs about love, loss and coping, with on-stage anecdotes that include her, well, idiosyncratic mother.

"She gave me a wealth of material," said Brooke by phone from Los Angeles, where she was finishing a new album.

Indeed. Born Nancy Lee Nelson, her mother was a professor, newspaper columnist, and poet who wrote under the pen name Darren Stone and loved the circus so much she moonlighted as a clown, performing, complete with greasepaint, at parades, parties and libraries.

She was also a devout Christian Scientist who believed illness was an illusion, advising her daughter that prayer would heal her broken wrist and leading her to ignore for years a small blemish near her nose.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Jonatha Brooke presents her critically acclaimed one-woman show at The Kate, this weekend.

Until, that is, the blemish spread into her sinus cavities, right eye socket, and hard palate, convincing Stone to seek medical intervention and resulting in a diagnosis of basil cell carcinoma and intensive surgeries, multiple reconstructions, and the four prosthetic noses referred to in the title of the show.

"She was funny, she was impossible," said Brooke, who moved her mother into the New York building of the apartment she shares with her producer husband Patrick Rains 12 years after the cancer diagnosis when Alzheimer's took hold.

"She'd rhyme and pun and go to the post office in her pajamas and bring things home from the dump

like a toy plastic Big Wheel bike missing a wheel," said the Boston native, whose mother died in January 2012.

"Our life together was, at times, amazingly rich theater. My only instinct: write it, sing it, tell it."

Which she did, in a stunning burst of production, performing "4 Noses" to sold-out houses in Connecticut, Minneapolis and Philadelphia by the end of 2013 before landing the show for a 12-week run at the off-Broadway Duke Theater.

The New York Times made it a critics' pick, calling it "devastating and gorgeous." Entertainment Weekly praised Brooke's gift for "sharing a story that's both familiar —

caring for an elderly parent with dementia — and unique in its quirky and intimate details."

That WNBC New York lauded the accomplished recording artist as a "natural storyteller whose lyrical gifts translate to the spoken word" is no surprise, given that her original music has appeared on several films, including Disney's "Return to Neverland" and "Tinker Bell" and on TV shows such as "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," "Ally McBeal," and "The Hills."

Nor is it any wonder that a superstar like Katy Perry, citing Brooke as an influence, invited her to co-write "Choose Your Battles," which she included on her chart-topping 2013 album "Prism."

None of which would have been possible without her mother, according to Brooke, who left Christian Science behind when she discovered Advil in her late 20s. Whatever their differences on religion, "she was my biggest fan," she said. "From the time I was a little kid, she made me feel I could do anything."

No less so toward the end of her life. "Even though she was goofing around in her somewhat demented way, this play was really her idea. Then I just kept thinking 'Wow, mom, I think you are right. I am getting this down. This really could turn into something.'"

Jonatha Brooke will perform "My Mother Has 4 Noses" on Friday, July 1 at 7:30 p.m. and on Saturday, July 2 at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook. For tickets and information, visit www.katharinehepburntheater.org or call 1-800-503-1286.

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Her mother urged her to write it all down. She did.