

Art and Entertainment

Rina Minervini

PETER Toerien has been after Laurika Rauch for years. Finally, this year, he nabbed her.

New beat for Laurika

Such determination is not surprising, given the singer's huge talent and the producer's well-known eye for a good thing. But it's also a matter of getting together with the girl next door — sort of.

"We both come from Pinelands. We knew of each other as children.

"He's offered me roles before, starting four or five years ago, but I've never been able to accommodate them. This time I thought that if I can change the arrangements for the few gigs I have for the time, maybe that's a sign. I could, so I did 'Hoagy'."

That's the Hoagy Carmichael show at the Alhambra which, aside from providing a cultural change of pace for the first lady of Afrikaans song, is reminding audiences that the composer wrote gorgeous songs.

"It's not a jazz show," she says. "It's very popular American music of the '30s and '40s, but it has an underlying jazz feel, an underlying blues feel. There's nothing alien about this music, in fact it's fantastic music. Wonderful titles like 'In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening', 'Stardust', 'Georgia' — people are aware of these songs, but they don't necessarily relate them to Hoagy Carmichael."

"Georgia" is her favourite, she's just sorry it crops up early in the show. She'd like time to work up to it. "Have you heard Ray Charles singing 'Georgia'? It's unbelievable after working with it to hear what he's doing with places you've been working on..."

"I think it's all right at the moment to do theatre without any angst. It's nice for me. It's good to sharpen your teeth on a classic.

"It's also very, very refreshing to work with people I hadn't met before, director, co-stars — David (Dennis) and Lisa (Michaelson) — and even the musicians. Also I'm reaching a different audience."

The show is also unusual for her in that she has to execute formal choreography.



Laurika Rauch in "Hoagy": "It's good to sharpen your teeth on a classic."

"I'm not a dancer, so it's a challenge, obviously, and very exciting. I have worked with choreographers before for television, with Lynton Burns and Wally Green, but with Jimmy Bell everything is done simultaneously. I was amazed. Usually you get the music right first, then you work on the dancing, and so on. It was really quite something for me.

"Dancers are amazing people. They see everything in a pattern, everything rhythmically. It's incredible, this pulse. This is something I was made aware of by my teacher, Sarie Lamprecht: the moment you achieve a rhythmic sound, people catch onto it. I don't want to say it's cosmic, that sounds too '60s, but it's an external thing, all around us."

Words like amazing and exciting keep cropping up when Laurika talks about her work. It makes one wonder what on earth she might do with herself if she ever gave up singing. The answer is make stained glass windows. "But I don't think I'll ever give up singing."

The success of her albums (the latest is "Stuur Groete aan Mannetjies Roux"), the ubiquity of her television presence ("I haven't done TV for a long time, you're seeing things that were done 18 months ago"), and the sheer, loving esteem in which she is held by music fundis make retirement unlikely.

Right now Pieter Swanepoel (lyricist and author) and Peter McLea (composer) are writing a one-woman show for her, to be directed by Ilse van Hemert for Pact. Watch for a November date.

Her collaborators are from the top of the tree. Swanepoel is a playwright of great talent (he wrote "Dalk"), which leads to another point. I ask a vague question about where Afrikaans music is going:

"I don't speculate with great glee," she says. "I can't predict. Afrikaans music has a life of its own, the house has many chambers. Just when I think I know what I'm doing something else comes along, and it's very exciting.

"I think it will grow more if more writers, true blood writers, get involved. I'm basing this on the Dutch cabaret artist Herman van Veen who uses lyrics only from the best Dutch poets. Songs must be strong on both counts, lyric and music. Think of the qualities of Theodorakis's music — you read the translation and to realise that the lyrics are not banal makes you very happy.

"The lyric is not to be messed with. If some of the established Afrikaans writers become more involved..."

Are they perhaps reticent to come forward?

"Yes, perhaps. But one should have the guts to make an open invitation."

It seems to me that an open invitation to write lyrics for Laurika Rauch to sing is well nigh irresistible. Writers, sharpen your quills.