

DAPHNE RUBIN VEGA INTERVIEW

By

John DeBellis

Her smile lit up her apartment almost as much as her debut as Mimi in the original cast of "Rent" lit up Broadway, which earned her a Theater World Award, a Tony nomination as Best Actress in a musical and the Drama Desk Award. Oh, it wasn't me she was casting her glow on. It was her toddler son, Luka who returned the smile, too young to realize that his talented mom played "Tia" Robert De Niro's love interest in "Flawless," or won the Blockbuster award as Best Supporting Actress in suspense for her performance in "Wild Things," or played Magenta in the Broadway production of "The Rocky Horror Show," or won best actress in the New York Independent Film and Video festival for her role as Olya in "Skeleton Woman." I'm sure, someday he'll also learn that his mom received a second Tony nomination for her portrayal of Nilo Cruz, in "Anna in the Tropics," or played the first Hispanic, Fantine, in "Les Miserables" and is worked with Philip Seymore Hoffman, in, "Jack Goes Boating," for the public theater. Right now, although he might not understand most of the words, he can listen to his Mom's terrific new album "Redemption Songs".

JOHN: Now that you've signed the CD for my daughter, who is huge fan, I think we should talk about the album.

DAPHNE: I now I have a baby, so I've gone legit so to speak, but before my son, my music was like my baby. Now it's like a sibling to Luka. You know it really is. It takes

awhile to gestate and then you make it and make sure that it's right. I have great, sort of, maternal instincts toward the CD. I want it to have a good life. Although once you put it out there it doesn't belong to you anymore.

JOHN: You sound like your happy the way the CD turned out.

DAPHNE: Yeah, I'm very excited about the CD. I'm kind of looking forward to doing more producing. It's the first time I've produced anything. And it's the first time I didn't have anyone else's agenda, you know, breathing down my neck.

JOHN: So you had the freedom of doing the songs you wanted to do.

DAPHNE: I didn't wait around thinking... Is this a hit? Or is this a hit. Usually when you're under the umbrella like a huge label, you need to have at least one or two hits. I didn't write it with that in my mind. I wrote what I wanted which was formed by what was happening in my life which was, you know....

JOHN: The birth of your son Luka.

DAPHNE: Yeah. "Luka" is a straight-ahead song about my son. "I can't wait to see you, there you are." "Angle Now" is a song referring to the people you love and you lose, but who are still present. "Mental Tennant" refers to all the agony going on your head that you got to just deal with.

JOHN: Speaking of agony. What was it like when you saw someone else play Mimi, the role you created on Broadway, in the movie version of Rent?

DAPHNE: There were times when I found it unbearable. I thought, "Oh, God, you're doing it all wrong." I could have sat there stewed and said, "Oh, my God the whole world is passing me bye." Here I am pregnant. I'm fat, I don't recognize myself and the world is moving on. Here's some beautiful talented girl playing MY ROLE! But, time

heals everything. You can't take this experience away from me. They say, in certain 12 steps program and spiritual things, "You can't keep it unless you give it away." It's true, that's part of owning it.

JOHN: I heard Leonard Cohen, say that when he hears someone else do his music now he suspends his criticism, so he can enjoy it. He says, "I don't always enjoy it, but now I automatically suspend it."

DAPHNE: And I think part of making the CD was having something to focus on. When Luka acts up because you're not giving him what he wants he'll tare the house apart. But if you give him something else, although he might not play with it right away, he might forget about what he wanted.

JOHN: He'll get distracted.

DAPHNE: That's what the album was.

JOHN: Listening to your album what I noticed right away. You started with a lot of power. Rock and Roll with almost psychedelic riffs, not slow psychedelic, the hard stuff.

DAPHNE: It was a way of saying that this is my CD and I want to start it out the way I want. Usually you never put a seven-minute song on the top of the album or on a CD period...unless it was the seventies. I grew up listening to this L-o-n-g s-o-n-g-s. It was kind of a little homage to, "A Day In The Life," and all those disco records that were a whole side of an album.

JOHN: The album is not all hard rock it contains several different styles. DAPHNE: It was kind of like my heritage. I think that the CD wanted to reflect the different influences and the different blood that runs through my veins so to speak. "Citizen of the World" is a heart felt sentiment, but it's also sort of a fact. I just wanted to divest myself

from the fear and remind myself of the people I love. It started out as a wish list love song, but it was also a reminder that we belong everywhere.

I grew up perceiving myself as a citizen of the world.

JOHN: America was the great melting pot, now I think the rest of world is following our lead.

DAPHNE: America is the home of citizens of the world. I mean, America ideally was created by people who got out of where they were because it wasn't working. And they wanted something better. So it sends me. It's always the ones who come last who dumps on the next one. Latinos we're still on the bottom of the ladder. Asian's are kept underneath us. Racism appalls me and it frightens me and I think that what I am, what my heritage is, which is a combination of wars. The blood that runs through my veins and my son's veins is the result of... I don't know how to put this without feeling like it's incendiary, but if weren't for the wars and the rapes I wouldn't be here. You wouldn't be here. I mean how many pure breeds are there.

PERFET TEN: The world is not going to be white, black or yellow. It's going be some where in the middle. People who stay away from other races are depriving them selves from a whole pool of genetics that add up to a bigger greater thing.

DAPHNE: Do you think that's why skinheads are so pissed? If they were no other races they'd just eat each other.

JOHN: Oh, yeah, it's all built on hate.

DAPHNE: Do you think it's genetic? (Laughing at her joke)

JOHN: I hope not.

DAPHNE: I think it's social.

PERFECT TEN: Everyone once in awhile there's a faulty gene that might make someone that way, but for the most part it's learned.

DAPHNE: I agree. I want to agree.

PERFECT TEN: There's an anger in Citizen's of the World. Like you want to shake people up.

DAPHNE: Yeah, I think there's a certain plaintiff tone to some of those songs. Which is like come on, work with me. Think a little bit. There's a lot more anger in the other albums that were more like I want something I can't have. Now I have something I don't want to lose.

PERFECT: And you have something that you want other people to want in an intellectual way.

DAPHNE: I feel very fortunate to have a family, a relationship, a career, a nice house and the where with all to sustain it. I want all of us to have these things and to share it. When I started making the album, I carried out that conscious decision. I went into the studio. The evolution of it ended up being different from what it would be when I started toying with the idea. There was a lot of painful stuff going on. There were deaths, losses of different kinds. And by the end of the project things were different. Things were better. My brothers are still dead, my husband's grandmother is still gone but things get better. We get better. We survive and we learn to cope.

JOHN: Your version of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" was very powerful.

DAPHNE: It's a beautiful song. I always wished I had written it. Some people think it's a song about religion. I say it's not really. I'm a spiritual person to a fault, although organized religion kind of freaks me out a little bit. It can divide more than it unites.

JOHN: I agree.

DAPHNE: But I respect how it's united folks. There are songs of redemption like the Bob Marley song that essentially say that in every nook and cranny you can find some beauty.

JOHN: I guess if you can if you look hard enough. Speaking of looking (looking around), didn't you used to have a strange house pet?

DAPHNE: I used to have a boa. I had to give her up to the petting zoo when I got pregnant.

JOHN: That's makes sense.

DAPHNE: So now she has a great home. She's a little bit like a super star.

JOHN: A boa is not a great pet when you have a little baby.

DAPHNE: I didn't just let her slither around the apartment. I kept her in the cage. Well, most of the time.

JOHN: So you limited her freedom so to speak, which segues into my next question. In your Broadway roles, where did they give you the most creative freedom, Rent or Les Miserables....

DAPHNE: In Rent they gave me a lot of freedom because I was creating the role the first time.

JOHN: Did they give you any freedom on Les Miserables?

DAPHNE: No...The creative people had very specific ideas about who Fantine is and where she comes from. Reading the book was kind confusing because it had a lot of my ideas.

JOHN: They still left you with a little leeway to put yourself in the role?

DAPHNE: You can't help but do that otherwise you're an automaton. I'm not good impersonation or imitating. When I realized that I had this impediment that I couldn't imitate. Then I embraced it as a good thing, which it is. I don't cop other people's things very well. I just make it my own. So that's why I was hired I guess. Within that there are certain parameters I have to adhere to.

JOHN: Casting you in the role of Fantine was very different.

DAPHNE: Les Miserables, for the first time, towards the end of the last run, casting was becoming more lenient. I spoke to someone who had been in it twenty years ago. Colored folk weren't allowed to be in the show. Yeah, that's huge. And I think well why? Well because it's the about the French Revolution. Well, yeah, but the French revolution is about something that's very very here and now. So here we are twenty-one years later and I'm thinking how can it not be multi-racial? With the talent pool that we have and with the quality of the piece, it doesn't make sense to be so restricted it. That's my opinion and I'm very thrilled that things have changed.

JOHN: Has having your own child effected they way you approached Fantine or other characters.

DAPHNE: I think so. It's hard to explain how exactly. Fantine's a girl who came from nothing. She has taken good care of herself and kept an heir of dignity. Her romantic notions of love get her in trouble because she becomes a pregnant at a time when an unwed mother can get ostracized. She was one of those girls you sow your oats with you don't marry. She can't afford a baby on her own and gives the baby to an abusive family who she wrongly thinks can take care of her child. And they milk her for everything she's got. So she's constantly working to support her daughter when her family is giving

the money to the other kid. In the novel she has beautiful hair and beautiful teeth. She sells her hair, she sells her teeth, she sells her body, like her soul. Everything is for this kid. It's almost like if... I didn't have a son. I'd be a crack head. I'm just working to get the next thing. Meditate on that for a while and it'll just make you cry. It's devastating.

JOHN: That's pretty powerful.

DAPHNE: You don't have to be a crack head to get it. Everybody has his or her quote "crack." Being a mother it's more nuanced than that, there's other colors in the pallet that are much more subtle, that are probably born of more biology. It's hard to put into words. People are always trying to get people to articulate that experience. It always falls short.

JOHN: So you use that in your work.

DAPHNE: I'm an actor, I act. It's what I do. There are moments in the show when you get these epiphanies... Like this is what's happening. I'm living in this make believe world. In this agony. The coins drop a little bit more. It's devastating. It's poignant. Life is incredibly beautiful in its poignancy.

JOHN: So where do you want to go now?

DAPHNE: Egypt, Morocco...(laughing)...

JOHN: You have the theater, music, you've done films.

DAPHNE: I haven't done television really. I've done guest spots here and there.

Television is such a powerful, powerful medium. One is capable of saying much in television and I'd like to find the sort of platform to do that. Where would I'd like to go? Well, my way of chilling out these days after Luka goes to sleep I take the DVD player in

my room, the bedroom, and I watch old Twilight zones. I'm crazy about the Twilight Zone.

JOHN: It's a great show, wonderfully written.

DAPHNE: Yes, that are wonderfully written half hour teleplays that stopped being done live. I love the whole idea of live television, serious writing with fantastic actors live. It's not new it's ancient.

JOHN: Those old shows were all written by these great writers.

DAPHNE: They were new then.

JOHN: But they had training in Playhouse ninety... It's not kids coming off the block learning about writing from watching sitcoms as opposed to a more sophisticated form.

DAPHNE: The writers also knew very well about the repercussions of censorship and really behaved within the context of constant censorship, yet somehow they would push it and push it... It was extremely creative.

JOHN: You're involved in some new creative endeavors.

DAPHNE: I'm in a theater lab... called the Labyrinth Theater Company. Phillip Seymore Hoffman is one of the co artistic directors and we're doing a play together in February.

It's a four-hander play

PERFECT: What's a four hander play?

DAPHNE: four characters. "Jack Goes Boating" is a play that we're doing at the public theater, John Ortiz, Beth Cole, Phillip Seymour Hoffman and myself. With this acting company it would be great to generate a series of pieces that we could put up and get out and move them. I would love to do that. But I know the power struggle is crazy.

PERFECT: That's always a problem. How did you get started working in the theater?

DAPHNE: There's was a point I just picked up Back Stage and starting going on auditions. Ignorance is bliss. I mean really, the village, growing up with gays, rockers, artists, were my education. Learning by doing and being involved as much as possible where ever they had me. Little by little I got a little bit more discriminating about what I was doing. It all worked for me as an education. I sill think that there is very little that can educate better in terms of acting or singing, then watching someone sing or act badly. That'll teach you a couple of things.

JOHN: As standup comic you learn by being bad a lot. Bombing gets you tougher and better at the same time.

DAPHNE: You've got to be bad before you can be good. I totally support that. Boy have I been bad. It's like all those experiences growing up ... It's funny walking or taking the subway to work... a block away where I get my Red Bull before the show.

JOHN; I read where you liked Red bull before a show.

DAPHNE: Red Bull, grapes and water. That corner is where I used to take the bus in grade school and go up town to school. It was all XXX and peep shows.... It was a different time.

JOHN: There were some pretty bad neighborhoods back then.

DAPHNE: Going back to Les Miserable in a way. It was the poor versus the rich class. Poverty will make you mad and make it so that you have nothing to lose.

JOHN: I started doing standup at the Improv on 44th and Ninth. Back then is was really "Hell's Kitchen."

DAPHNE: Just before I did a play called, “Everything’s Turning Into Beautiful” at theater row and there’s a photo in the lobby of that block back then, there were seedy people wearing maxi coats and Afros... And it was just pimp and hooker City

JOHN: I think it’s gone over the top with its Disney gentrification, but it’s safer.

DAPHNE: Much safer. Although some days it’s “give me back the hookers.” There are just more people now. I grew up going there. Back then you had to walk with your radar open. It’s a New Yorker thing, like “You just don’t want to mess with me. I might be twelve, but you don’t know what I have. I may have mace or a knife”

JOHN: You sounded like a pretty tough kid.

DAFENE: It’s funny in certain ways I have waxed quite conservative. The idea of my son growing up there. There’s no way!

JOHN: Having kids changes things. They don’t always make us better but they make us deeper. We sacrifice a piece of ourselves for them.

DAPHNE: I’ve got this never-ending laundry list of things I have to do in my head. But for him I have to be present right now. I have to be aware of breathing. So it’s not without cost.

JOHN: But it’s a cost that pays dividends. An investment in our selves.

DAPHNE; Absolutely. It’s investment in our mortality. I don’t want anything to happen to him, or ever get hurt, which I know is ridiculous. I want him to live on beyond me. And kids teach us...they teach us to chill.