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# The gospel according to Mahalia

## Ranee Lee stars as legendary singer in new play

By Walter J. Lyng  
The Suburban

*The Mahalia Jackson Musical* is set to open on Sunday, March 3 at the Segal Centre. Although rehearsals are currently ongoing, the play's star, Ranee Lee, has been preparing for the better part of two years.

"We were supposed to do it last year and it was cancelled," says Lee. "It was a little disappointing because I had really studied diligently for her and researched her mannerisms. I put it away and went onto other projects and when Roger Peace, the writer and director of the play, approached me again and said it was on, I was thrilled because now I had this history behind me and I had delved a little bit more into something I took for granted when I was growing up. I think the most that I knew was that she was Aretha Franklin's mentor."

Far from being defined simply as the Queen of Gospel, Jackson also figured prominently in the Civil Rights movement culminating with Martin Luther King's historic March on Washington, where she performed in front of 250,000 people. *The Mahalia Jackson Musical* traces the rise of the singer from poverty in New Orleans, to international success as one of the most influential gospel artists in the world. A local icon in the genre of jazz, Lee says her own history with gospel music was more staggered.

"I was born and raised Roman Catholic so there was very little gospel shouting and a lot of liturgy, all of which I appreciated because I think that's where I got a lot of my strength,"

she says. "But I had friends who were Baptists and within other realms of Christianity. As I grew older I started appreciating the music I would hear on televised gospel TV shows. It was very moving and spiritual and touching and awakening."

Backed up by nine members of Montreal's Imani Gospel Singers choir and jazz pianist Taurey Butler on stage, Lee and co. will perform standards such as "When the Saints Go Marchin' In," "Summertime," and "Down by the Riverside."

"Roger has given me the liberty of singing it in the style of who I am and to create the essence of the music," she says. "I'm not going to try to emulate or sing like Mahalia, although I'm going to try to be as convincing and approachable with that music as I possibly can. But there's only one Mahalia and I'm hoping that I can even just come to the threshold of the elaborateness of her voice."

Joining Lee in the cast are Adrienne Irving and Tristan D. Lalla who will play a total of seven characters representing various family members and friends of Jackson during the 50-year period the play covers.

More familiar with her body of work than ever before, Lee says she appreciates Jackson now more than ever.

"I love her," she says. "I really do. I feel inspired and renewed in my own convictions because I'm old enough now to appreciate everything that she's had to do and her contributions that laid the groundwork for people today."

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