

10 Days of Distinction

Celebrated diva's double bill enriches illustrious lineup at Festival of the Arts Boca

By Greg Carannante

In its 18th year, Festival of the Arts Boca serves up the sort of distinctive program that has distinguished each of its previous iterations. This year, however, the 10-day festival arrives with the added prestige of hosting two appearances by the recently anointed Kennedy Center honoree, Renée Fleming.

"I was just absolutely thrilled," the diva says of her experience at December's *Kennedy Center Honors*. Fleming was among five honorees — with Dionne Warwick, Queen Latifah, Barry Gibb and Billy Crystal — celebrated by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Arts for their enduring contributions to American culture.

"I mean, I was moved. I can't tell you. It was exhilarating. Basically I was trying to keep from breaking down and just sobbing outright because, you know, it was just such an overwhelming experience."

At the Boca festival, the reigning queen of sopranos appears in concert on

March 3, and on the following evening, she hosts a program that embraces an issue near and dear to her heart. The presentation, "Renée Fleming: Music and the Mind," features a panel of local scientists and doctors exploring the profound connections between music and mental well-being.

"Because I've performed on Broadway as well as my constant touring and opera, I've made friends in various different worlds," Fleming says, describing the cavalcade of artists who appeared on stage in her honor at the televised Kennedy Center gala. "You give them lists of people that you are friends with. I gave them a list of young sopranos that I really adore and try to support as much as I can, thinking that maybe they would get one person who was available because our schedules are so challenging. And when so many of them came, I was just really overwhelmed. They keep you in the dark, you know. We don't really know

what the tribute's going to be, so we're shocked as well.

"I have a lot of fabulous women friends. And I was just really blown away to see them there."

Returning to Festival of the Arts Boca for the third time, including the inaugural 2007 event, Fleming says it's the audiences that keep her coming back.

"The audiences in Florida and especially southern Florida are reminiscent of the audiences in New York and the major Eastern capitals. So I feel like I'm at home. And it's beautiful. It's such an elegant place."

The Boca audiences will be treated to an array of performances — from Mancini to Mizrahi — that's right in step with Fleming's own flair for the eclectic (her recording credits extend to an album of rock covers, 2010's *Dark Hope*.) The festival lineup features daily programs at Mizner Park Amphitheater in downtown Boca Raton:



March 1: The opening night concert commemorates the centennial of legendary maestro Henry Mancini, with his daughter, vocalist Monica Mancini, backed by the renowned Henry Mancini Institute Orchestra. Classic melodies from *Moon River* to *The Pink Panther* are accompanied by an exclusive visual journey through the life of the iconic composer.

March 2: The orchestral-visual theme continues with the cinematic experience of *Jaws* shown with its *dun-dun dun-dun* score synchronized live by Festival Orchestra Boca, a Florida premiere.



March 3 (afternoon): Author Daisy Dowling leads a conversation inspired by *Workparent*, her parenting guide that focuses on the parents, not the kids.



March 3 (evening): “Renée Fleming Returns” for a recital of arias and selections from the Great American Songbook.

March 4: “Renée Fleming: Music and the Mind.”



March 5: “The Future Stars Competition” showcases top local singers and dancers.



March 6: Nicholas Thompson, CEO of *The Atlantic* and former editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine, does a deep dive into the “The Wired Future” and the effect of technology, with tips on how to use it more effectively.



March 7: American poet and public speaker Richard Blanco, selected by President Obama as the fifth Presidential Inaugural Poet in U.S. history, offers insights through poetry and prose.

March 8: Barcelona Flamenco Ballet’s *Luxuria*, a South Florida exclusive, introduces a new flamenco concept that infuses the traditional dance with jazz and contemporary ballet.



March 9: The multi-talented Isaac Mizrahi takes the stage for his critically acclaimed cabaret show, *Hello Isaac*. Backed by a six-piece jazz band, the fashion designer extraordinaire interprets selections from the Great American Songbook, spiced up with his comedic musings.



March 10: Bookending the festival with a tribute to another quintessentially American composer, “100 Years of Rhapsody in Blue” presents George Gershwin’s beloved composition as it was premiered in 1924 with a jazz band. Performed by the Festival Boca Jazz Orchestra, conducted by Kyle Prescott and featuring pianist Dominic Cheli, the concert will close with jazz and swing band classics and an invitation to the audience to get up and dance.



Festival of the Arts Boca tickets range from \$15 to \$150 — with the exception of the free “Future Stars Competition” — and are available by calling 561-757-4762 or at festivalboca.org.