

Festival of the Arts Boca presents Isaac Mizrahi

By Ben Crandell
South Florida Sun Sentinel

Festival of the Arts Boca is back through March 10, again offering a splendid menu of performances and conversation led by the Barcelona Flamenco Ballet, author and thinker Nicholas Thompson of The Atlantic and poet Richard Blanco.

But within FAB's diverse range of entertaining artistry, cultural eloquence and just plain fun, no evening may capture all of those elements in one better than a March 9 performance by Isaac Mizrahi.

The louche and loquacious Brooklyn native is best known as a fashion designer and TV personality, but he is coming to Boca Raton in the guise of dapper cabaret singer, backed by a six-piece band.

While he has a deep respect for the music — his sets draw from the Great American Songbook, as well as jazzy interpretations of modern pop tunes — a typical Mizrahi show is an appealing appliqué of chatty humor and musings on contemporary culture (as heard on his entertaining podcast, "Hello Isaac").

The New York Times calls Mizrahi, a graduate of the city's prestigious LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, "a founding father of a genre that fuses performance art, music and stand-up comedy."

In a phone conversation during a recent run of performances called "Mizrahi on Ice" at the famed Café Carlyle on New York's Upper East Side, Mizrahi spoke about the music he's bringing to Boca Raton, stage fright and LGBTQ artists performing in Florida.

The Carlyle is the pinnacle of cabaret entertainment. It was Bobby Short's room. Did you see his shows at the Carlyle?

Sure, I saw him many times. I grew up at the

Carlyle seeing Bobby Short, Elaine Stritch, Eartha Kitt, so many people. I'm so lucky to have that history.

Your residency at the Carlyle is called "Mizrahi on Ice." I assume there is no skating involved, so are you going for more of a Dean Martin vibe?

No, no skating. It's an annual residency, and I try to come up with different names. It's evocative of scotch on the rocks, you know? And it's in winter. The music that I do and the jokes that I do are very ... they're adult. So when you say Dean Martin, I think of that adult kind of entertainment. So, yes to that. Whether it's in a club or in a theater, there is a kind of escapism that I encourage.

It looks effortless, but I hear you get stage fright. You're from Brooklyn — what scares you?

Oh my god, are you kidding me? There should be a new word to describe the level of stage fright that I feel. It's something that keeps coming up as I get older and perform more.

Performing in New York I'm nervous enough, because it's a very, very smart audience, right? But last year I had a small engagement at the Annenberg (Center for the Performing Arts) in L.A. Which is a very important room. It was sold out and it was fabulous. My whole life, I was so scared of performing in L.A. I never accepted an engagement. Finally, my manager told me that I have to take this gig.

It was full of people and friends and other performers. They're coming to see me! It's such a crazy thing to see them sitting in the audience comparing what I do to the great things they do, you know? It was among the craziest forms of stage fright, to the point that I was only able to do it because it was so ridiculous. When I finished that little engagement, I was on cloud nine.

It sounds like the audience appreciates your



Isaac Mizrahi will perform at Festival of the Arts Boca on March 9. JASON FRANK ROTHENBERG/COURTESY

talent more than you do.

Listen, objectively, it's worthy. My shows are very worthy of being seen, and that's the only way that I can get myself onstage, is to tell myself that and to believe it.

Your Café Carlyle setlists certainly have been eclectic, with songs by Fred Neil ("Everybody's Talkin'"), Burt Bacharach ("Alfie"), Billie Eilish ("Everything I Wanted") and Madonna ("Borderline"). Is that a template for your concert in Boca Raton?

The luxury I have on the road is bringing all my best stuff, and some of those songs will be on the set list. One thing I do all the time is this updated version of "You're the Top," the Cole Porter tune. I rewrite the lyrics, so it's this very funny thing, and people really love it. I've done a whole new version of it at the Carlyle, and you will get a version of that in Boca Raton.

You will also get a version of "Liza With a Z," and I'll probably do "Borderline." It's one of the great tunes that I do and, with the band, it's such a great arrangement. I think you'll love it. And you will probably get a Billie Eilish tune, because I'm obsessed with her. We

do a lot of covers of Billie Eilish.

What is it about her music?

On top of being so brilliant as a performer and so good to look at and everything else, she is a very, very good songwriter. Her songs are so meaningful to me, personally. There's a lot of music out there that I don't know if I can relate to so much, and she's so young, and I love relating to someone so young. I love being able to reach across the generations.

Should the audience come with questions to ask?

No, this is really not that kind of show. It's really me in front of the audience just talking. It's an hour and 15 (minutes), maybe an hour and a half, and I do 10 or 11 tunes. Whatever isn't a tune, I'm just kind of talking to the audience about things that I've experienced in my life.

Florida of late has not been the most hospitable place for the LGBTQ community. Is that something you think about as you are jetting down?

Of course I think about it, of course I do. I also think that whatever audience I do attract is going to be in the room expecting something,

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Festival of the Arts Boca

WHEN: March 1-10

WHERE: Mizner Park Amphitheater, 590 Plaza Real, Boca Raton

COST: Tickets range in price from \$20-\$250. Two FAB events also will be available via livestream on the Vimeo App for \$15 each: Nicholas Thompson and Richard Blanco. For information, visit FestivalBoca.org/events/stream.

INFORMATION: FestivalBoca.org

expecting me to talk about some things that resonate with them.

But, honestly, I don't think of Florida as being a separate country from the United States. It's everywhere, every place you go. ... In New York, darling, I can't tell you. In Pennsylvania, I go to Pennsylvania a lot because of QVC, there's so much. ... The country is very torn apart right now.

One of my goals in this world is to stand for something and try to say what I believe is the truth. And that's what I'll say about it. But I don't think of Florida as any better or worse than any other part of the country. I really mean that.

You are a Renaissance man. Tell me something you can't do.

I'm really, really bad at math. Terrible. I'm also bad at planning anything to do with money. Really not good at all. I spend way too much, and then I'm too frugal about the stupidest things.

What do you spend too much on?

I don't even know. I remember when I was first getting suits made on Savile Row, I was 28 or 30 years old, and they told me how much they were, and I heard it in pounds and said, "Hey, yeah, we're getting a great deal here." Then my bill came through from American Express and I was like "Oh, my God!" And I bought,

like, so many suits. I didn't even think, right?

But how'd you look?

I looked really good, I've got to tell you. That's one thing. And I still have the damn suits.

Festival highlights

Nicholas Thompson, "The Wired Future," 7 p.m. Wednesday, March 6: The author and CEO of The Atlantic, formerly editor-in-chief of Wired and an editor at The New Yorker, will talk about the need for an engaged society and vigilant journalism to keep Big Tech in check. Tickets: \$40.

Richard Blanco, 7 p.m. Thursday, March 7: The poet at President Barack Obama's inauguration in 2013 and a 2023 recipient of the National Humanities Medal from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Blanco will read from his most recent collection, "Homeland of My Body." Ticket: \$25.

Barcelona Flamenco Ballet, "Luxuria," 7:30 p.m. Friday, March 8: The dancers, accompanied by a five-piece band, will perform a pioneering style of flamenco ballet that mixes classical music, jazz and conventional flamenco music to tell the compelling love story in "Luxuria." Tickets: \$30-\$115.

"An Evening with Isaac Mizrahi," 7:30 p.m. Saturday, March 9: Accompanied by his band, Mizrahi will offer his sassy lounge act and favorite songs by Cole Porter, Madonna, Billie Eilish and others. Tickets: \$30-\$115.

100 Years of "Rhapsody in Blue," 7 p.m. Sunday, March 10: Led by conductor Kyle Prescott, Festival Boca Jazz Orchestra and pianist Dominic Cheli will explore George Gershwin's iconic "Rhapsody in Blue" in the original version performed at its famous premiere in 1924. Tickets: \$35-\$115.