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## *CULTURE MIX - Gehry has designs on fado favorite Mariza*

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Frank Gehry's spontaneous brainstorm seemed like a good idea over a couple of cocktails with one of his favorite artists, Mariza, the glamorous fado singer from Portugal who performs Sunday at Disney Hall. Why not set the stage for her show, Gehry suggested, by turning the sleek, ultra-modern auditorium into an intimate, folksy taberna, like those bohemian Lisbon hangouts where fans have soaked up this mournful, melodic music since the 1800s?

Now, with the concert fast approaching, the world-famous architect who designed the hall wonders if his flight of fancy as a music fan could end up being his folly. Just days before showtime, Gehry was still toying with his "risky" concept in set design, for which he didn't have so much as a sketch.

Mariza has performed here before to great acclaim on unadorned stages, including Disney Hall during its 2004 debut season. Why tinker with success?

"This is absolutely an idiotic extravagance," Gehry told me. "It may be a total flop, and you might be right, we should have left it alone. . . . Why the hell am I bothering these people? She [Mariza] looks great and her singing is fantastic. She doesn't need this . . . [he pauses for the right word] this prop to make her look good. Do I need to inject my ego into her thing?"

Gehry's fretting is not that unusual, but just because he's neurotic doesn't mean he shouldn't worry. He'll have to build his tavern replica literally overnight, since another concert is scheduled for Saturday. The challenge is to envelop the audience in the taberna atmosphere, where singers perform in close quarters, often mingling with the audience. For Sunday's show, the sketchy plan revealed so far calls for setting up 40 tavern tables on the stage, complete with bottles of Portuguese wine.

But the architect's self-effacing remark about meddling in Mariza's career sounds more like part of the act. Gehry knows exactly what he's doing and why -- lending his name to call attention to a classy performer he believes deserves a wider audience.

Gehry is serving as one of those cultural gatekeepers -- like Paul Simon or David Byrne - - who point us to worthy art from around the world. They're often knocked as cultural imperialists for exploiting their "discoveries." But in the case of the L.A. architect and the Portuguese chanteuse, a genuine partnership seems to have emerged.

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Mariza calls Gehry the "Picasso of architecture" because he's -- "how do you say in English 'a frente do seu tempo?' " -- ahead of his time." What Gehry values in Mariza's work, above all, is the same quality he strives for in his own: passion.

"In my work, I try to make buildings that have feeling in them when they're done," Gehry explains. "And that's hard to do because I've got to go through five or six thousand hands touching it. . . . When a person sings with a passion like that, which comes from years of fermenting in the culture, it's not just somebody singing now, it's an embedded history in her voice [expressing] her world and her love and life. It exudes that feeling and passion, but it's tangible because she's there. I'm in the same room with her."

Gehry sighs as he tries to capture the feeling.

"I settle in and I completely . . . I'm in it."

The fascinating history of fado and its enduring power is vividly conveyed in the documentary "Mariza and the Story of Fado," a DVD included with her latest CD, "Mariza: Concerto em Lisboa." Fado is considered the national music of Portugal, a song style whose tradition parallels the nation's dramatic history.

Fittingly, the word means "fate," since the tumultuous evolution of fado is intrinsically tied to Portugal's political fortunes, from its 19th century empire to the 20th century dictatorship and the 21st century populist revival. Through all of that, fado has been exiled by a Napoleonic invasion, championed by Marxists, censored by fascists and finally embraced by those intent on salvaging the tradition and national pride.

In many ways, culturally and socially, fado is to Portugal as flamenco is to neighboring Spain and tango is to Argentina. They represent not just a music style but an outlook on the world. All were originally scorned by respectable society for their associations with the outcast and the downtrodden -- transients, prostitutes and especially the poor -- only to emerge as cultural glue for people of all classes.

Mariza has led her country's recent fado revival. Her lineage -- half African, half European -- makes her well suited as the standard-bearer of a music with Afro-Brazilian roots, a vestige of the Portuguese colonial era. Her striking looks and natural talent make her the perfect ambassador for Portuguese culture.

Anyone who sees Mariza perform can clearly see why Gehry could be instantly bewitched. With her platinum blond hairstyle and her regal figure draped in elegant gowns, she projects a cosmopolitan image for the blue-collar music the native of Mozambique sang as a child in her father's tavern, patronized by butchers, sailors, thieves and peddlers from the streets of Mouraria, one of Lisbon's enchanting hillside neighborhoods where fado was cultivated, perhaps with Moorish roots.

As a teenager, she confesses, she was ashamed of fado and chose to sing instead in bands that emulated the Rolling Stones, but her heart always returned to fado. The world's top pop acts, she observes, "spend huge amounts of money, but in five years they're gone. I'm talking about music that has 200 years [behind it] and has never been gone."

Mariza, 33, and Gehry, 78, tell different stories about how they met, like the lyrics of that Maurice Chevalier ditty, "Ah yes, I remember it well." It was in Lisbon, he says, where they were introduced by the former mayor who was courting the architect for a development in the historic city center. It was in Hollywood, remembers Mariza, where she was surprised backstage at the House of Blues by Gehry and his Panamanian wife, Berta, a Latin music enthusiast. (Gehry says the line for autographs after the show was so long his party didn't get to dinner until 2 a.m., which is just about right for Lisbon.)

The Lisbon development plans have stalled, he said, a casualty of shifting political winds. It was a disappointment for Mariza, since the project would have rebuilt a theater district where her fado idol, the legendary Amalia Rodrigues, used to perform.

Now, Gehry gets to bring a touch of Lisboa to Los Angeles. And he wants to make it right. For his set design, he at first considered using a gauzy fabric until he realized it "looked too pretty and didn't have enough guts to it" for an authentic taberna.

"I've struggled with it, actually," he confesses. "We'll see how it comes out."

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