

THE VOICE OF "BELLE" PAINTS HER TALE

Meet Paige O'Hara: A Disney Movie Rewards Exclusive



Paige O'Hara, the voice of Disney's Belle, was born in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, and made her first appearance on Broadway in *Show Boat* in 1983. Her most notable performance onscreen — Belle in *Beauty And The Beast* — established Paige as the iconic voice for one of Disney's most beloved animated leading ladies. She's had a passion for painting fine art almost as long as she has for performing and singing. Recently, we spoke with the accomplished Ms. O'Hara to learn more about the abundant talent behind Belle's beautiful voice.

It's very rare to interview a talent who is at home on Broadway, opera and concert stages, the big screen, the recording studio, voice-over booth, and even an artist's canvas, but with Paige O'Hara you get that and more...she's also a self-described basketball fanatic. For the record, she's picking Pat Riley, LeBron James, Dwayne Wade, Chris Bosh and the Miami Heat to take it all the way in the coming season.

Her life journey to become a New York stage star, then play Belle and go beyond, is a fascinating one with a lot of hard work and preparation for that big "break." She tells those who have such dreams to, "Be prepared for when that time happens. Do your homework and know what you're doing, then you'll be ready, that's really important." Not just casual advice, but real lessons from one who has lived it.



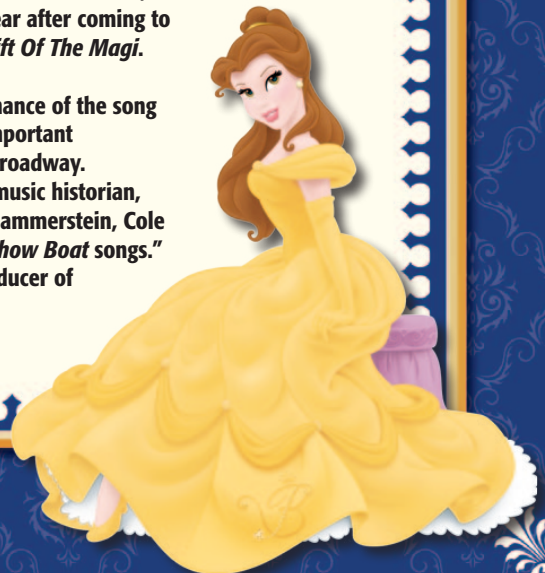
Her first performing arts memory was at a party thrown by mom and dad. At all of seven years old, she was singing and dancing in the living room along to an *Annie Get Your Gun* album with Ethel Merman. She remembers, "The room just stopped. It got real quiet. I had delivered some kind of showstopper moment." And everyone kept telling her about that moment for years. She was hooked.

Living in Ft. Lauderdale, acting lessons soon followed at the local children's theater. Not until she was 12 did Paige realize that she does indeed have a big voice. "In high school, I started studying with an ex-New York City opera singer, Flora Dane. She had retired to Ft. Lauderdale and she was really a wonderful teacher. She taught me how to belt...correctly...and to sing in a legit soprano voice." This all was at a time when her mother was a director at her high school, Nova, one of the few performing arts high schools outside the New York area. Her mom

also loved to take the students on field trips to see New York's Broadway shows. For Paige the die was cast. "It was great, just great. That really helped me make my decision to head to New York at 17."

After her parents flipped out a bit, the Belle-like and headstrong Paige really didn't give them a choice. "You think at 17 that you're going to conquer the world. You realize pretty quickly that you're in the big pond now. There are a lot of people equally as talented as you are — some of them a lot more!" She knew she had to get a job to support her studies, so she cleaned apartments, painted watercolors and sold them on the street. "I was very lucky. Only a year after coming to New York, I got my Equity Card and created my first off-Broadway role—"Della" in *The Gift Of The Magi*.

After starring as Marta in a revival of *Company*, and with her critically acclaimed performance of the song "Another Hundred People," the phone started ringing. But according to Paige her most important connection might have stemmed from her casting as Ellie May Chipley in *Show Boat* on Broadway. That led to her connection with famed conductor John McGlinn. Paige recalls, "He was a music historian, one of the best ever, and he worked closely with the estates of Jerome Kern, Rodgers & Hammerstein, Cole Porter and Gershwin. He produced and I sang on an award-winning recording of all the *Show Boat* songs." There was another big fan of that particular recording out there: the future executive producer of Disney's *Beauty And The Beast*, Howard Ashman.



A Disney enthusiast herself, and a huge fan of *The Little Mermaid*, Paige read all about plans for *Beauty And The Beast* in the New York Times. "My agent got me the audition, and there I was with 500 others and instructions to 'just sing something that you love.' I chose 'Heaven Help My Heart' from *Chess*." By auditions 3, 4, and 5 the "whole gang" came to New York – Don Hahn, Gary Trousdale, Kirk Wise, Howard Ashman, Alan Menken, and Jeffrey Katzenberg. They must have liked her Jerome Kern quality and the hint of Judy Garland in her speaking voice (just listen with your eyes closed), because an hour after the end of audition #5, she had the plumb part. With a happy and distinctly "Belle" giggle, Paige recalls that "it was a very special week because my birthday was a couple days before and Michael [Piontek] had proposed to me that day!"

Considered a bit odd in her own childhood for preferring Porter and Kern to Zeppelin and Hendrix, a stroke of poetic justice and years of hard work gave Paige a part with which she could completely identify. "I have received so much mail from girls who are appreciative that Belle is physically identifiable for them (like being) the first princess with brown eyes. For me, if you're talking my elementary school years, I was a little ahead of my time just like Belle, wanting something different, something magnificent in your life, an adventure."



The adventure of making *Beauty And The Beast* lasted two years for Paige, four years for the entire filmmaking process. "So much of it was hand drawn, which is what I really love about the new Blu-ray™ version. You're seeing so much detail that we haven't seen before...the clarity, and the moments when Belle blushes. I never saw her blush before." But perhaps the film's most enduring quality comes from the simple timeless message that real beauty comes from within.

That eye for detail comes out in another passionate pursuit for Paige O'Hara. She recently signed with Collectors Editions, the publishers of Disney Fine Art, to produce a series of "Belles By Belle" paintings...but this was no overnight success story either. With an architect stepfather, art books all over the house and plenty of encouragement, she built upon a talent noticed in her youthful sketches by her stepfather's experienced eyes. "He didn't start me off with

small stuff. He introduced me to Turner and Sargent, and I would just copy them, and as I went along, I got better and better and pretty much stayed in the medium of watercolor and gouache."

"I remember in acting class when I was a little girl, my teacher was very strict. She scared me to death to tell you the truth. I would bring her watercolors instead of an apple...you know...to soften her up a little bit." Paige's artwork, and the energy she poured into improving and learning from every book she could get her hands on (sound familiar?) served a dual purpose. "It was my escape when I was struggling and when I was unemployed. Going home and painting was an escape to deal with the rejection. It really helped me to focus on something positive and not be upset." Selling watercolors on the street also helped her survive those early acting years in New York.

Before Paige puts color to canvas, she'll try to take on the mood of what she is about to paint. She might study source material for several days then start a creative journey that can take months to complete. There are many "favorites" in her body of work, featuring both Belle and Beast and other subjects, but how does she feel about them ending up in other homes? "It makes me very proud. I'm very grateful to my stepfather for pushing me to be an artist – he was always behind me, like my mom was always behind me with acting."

These days the multi-talented Paige lives, paints and works in Las Vegas, where she's in her fifth year performing in the hit stage comedy, *Menopause The Musical*. It may seem a little "out of character," but not to Paige. "Belle would approve because it's a play that makes women feel empowerment, and it's okay to be going through middle age and be able to laugh about it."



Not one to paint too rosy a picture, Paige's career path is full of great life lessons. "It does take a lot of work. If you really have the dream in your heart, then you really have to fight for it. Learn from the elders before you. I learned the most from the talent that came before me." That's sound advice from the voice and conscience of Belle.

Two of Paige's beautiful paintings are available as rewards (quantities are limited). Learn more about "First Date" (left) and "Belle's In Love" (right) in the Disney Movie Rewards catalog.



For more information on Paige O'Hara's artwork, please visit www.disneyfineart.com. Be sure not to miss our exclusive offer of limited edition Paige O'Hara's artwork, available only to Disney Movie Rewards members – simply click on the PROMOTIONS link on our home page then select the "Special Offers" tab. © Disney