

WHAT'S ON

Mica Paris: 'It shows the dark side of the industry and getting famous'

Singer, actress, presenter and author Mica Paris talks to **Marianka Swain** about the 30th anniversary production of *Fame*, which is coming to London's Peacock Theatre

Alan Parker's iconic film about New York's High School for the Performing Arts, plus the subsequent TV series and musical, have legions of dedicated fans - among them Mica Paris.

"I rushed home to watch it!" she recalls. "It was so aspirational; I could never afford stage school. It was also the first time I saw a black person dancing like that, in tights - that representation was amazing. And the issues it dealt with felt real."

Authenticity is still a major asset of *Fame*, Paris believes. "Musicals can be a bit twee or sugary, whereas this shows you everything. It's two-and-a-half hours of really good stories, with incredible dancing, hope and ambition, plus the dark side of the industry and getting famous."

Paris plays strict but caring English teacher Miss Sherman. "She's very close to me as a person - I definitely get my mothering instincts out. And I had teachers like that in the eighties; they might clip kids round the ear, but they felt like a secondary parent."

She's proud to be in a show that emphasises the discipline of the craft, "how hard great performers work. No short cuts through reality shows! Though it does seem more competitive now - everyone wants to be a performer.



Mica Paris plays Miss Sherman in *Fame*, which arrives in the West End on September 11.

Picture: ALESSIA CHINAZZO

"When I was a kid, I did assemblies, I played Oliver, the lot, because I was the 'creative' one. With social media now, you grow up performing in a way."

However, Paris thinks *Fame* speaks to all ages. "What's wonderful is we're getting audiences who saw it first time round, plus kids and teenagers who really relate - people are still dealing with the stuff we portray, like sex, heartbreak, prejudice, drugs, body image, identity... It really is a story that will live forever!"

Paris's big number is the

powerful "These Are My Children", which she says fits her "so well, I wish I'd written it myself. People cry when they hear it, because I mean every word - I am a mum." She also acts as surrogate mum to her castmates on tour. "They come to me for advice. It's an exciting time: women have more independence and our opinions are being taken seriously. And being with young people keeps me fresh!"

Paris has also been exploring women in the industry via her Radio 2 show *Mica Meets*, interviewing musical greats. "A

lot of it is misunderstood: focussing on the drugs, not the pressures women are under. Gladys Knight was incredible - we were supposed to do an hour, [but] ended up chatting for three! Sister Sledge were wonderful too. There's more coming up, and I'm writing a book about female artists. Plus I'm putting out a new record next year."

Juggling different projects is how she's maintained a career that began when she was just a teenager, explains Paris. "You have to keep evolving. Aged 10, I told my grandparents I wanted to

make an album with all different styles, and I've since done soul, dance, jazz, gospel... If I hadn't switched it up on my second album *Contribution*, I wouldn't have had Lauren Hill doing backing vocals or a song by Prince."

Islington-born Paris met her idol Prince at Camden Palace when she was 18, impressing him with her singing. "Later, he called me up and said he was sending over some songs for me to choose from - 'If I Love U 2 Night' was my favourite. Then he flew me out to Paisley Park in Minneapolis and played all this music from his vault, going 'What do you think?' What did I think? I mean, you're Prince, it's all great!" Six months before his death, they met up at Camden Palace once again, "coming full circle."

Not all risks pay off - "I made a twit of myself on *Strictly*; I was dreadful!" - but Paris is proud that, whatever she does, she does it with passion.

"I'm an artist, and that means bringing joy to people's lives. I'm so excited *Fame's* coming to London - I haven't been in the West End since 1996. This is just the best show for taking you out of your day-to-day, having an amazing experience, and going home uplifted."

***Fame* is at the Peacock Theatre, Portugal Street, WC2A 2HT from September 11 to October 19.**



Left: The musical is touring the UK to mark *Fame's* 30th anniversary, Right: the cast perform at Manchester's Palace Theatre.

Pictures: ALESSIA CHINAZZO, TRISTRAM KENTON