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'Summer: The Donna Summer Musical' set for Thursday at Keith-Albee

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HUNTINGTON — It's all about that bass.

Singer and actress Charis Gullage found her way into the music of legendary disco diva Donna Summer through her father and his bass guitar.

Gullage, who performs as "Disco Donna" in "Summer: The Donna Summer Musical," which comes to the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center in Huntington on Thursday, April 7, said she and her father were listening to the song "Last Dance," one of the biggest hits for Summer, when she asked him, "Dad, have you heard this before?"

She said he laughed and said, "Yes, and so have you. Quite a bit."

Gullage's father wasn't just a bass player. He's a touring performer who has played with a range of artists, including Tyler Perry and Dr. John, but he's played in a variety of ensembles.

The music of Donna Summer was just part of his musical vocabulary. He knew her music. He'd played her music.

Gullage said she and her father would sometimes sit and listen to music together. They'd talk about it.

"Do you hear that?" her father would say. "That's the bassline driving that song."

Gullage said he'd tell her how the bass rounded off the edges and tied a song together. She remembered what she learned.

"In doing some script study and researching Donna Summer, I found out that she started her songs with a bassline," Gullage said. "That was how she built her songs."

"Summer" is a jukebox musical. It is entirely music-driven, with songs inspiring scenes and action, and music often or entirely replacing dialogue.

The show highlights and explores the musical career and life of Donna Summer. As "Disco Donna," Gullage stands in for Summer as her career is taking off and she's hitting the charts with songs like "Hot Stuff," "Bad Girl" and "Love to Love You, Baby."

"I'm in the middle part," Gullage said. "Donna is exploring herself as a woman, an artist and a musician. The role is instrumental in understanding the career of Donna Summer, and the ups and downs she had as an artist, but also as a woman of color living in the times she did."

With the pandemic, being part of the show has been something of a roller coaster, with shifting requirements for prevention and safety different in every state.

“We try to be healthy and take precautions and hope that our audiences are doing the same thing,” she said.

Gullage is only a couple of years out of college. She graduated from Loyola with a bachelor’s degree in musical theater just before the start of the pandemic. This is her first national tour.

The experience has been a good one and full of life lessons.

“I’ve learned to be more grateful and to choose kindness,” she said. “There are so many times when not choosing kindness is easier.”

She said touring during the pandemic has taught her to be more adaptable and ready for just about anything.

“Stay hydrated,” she said, adding, “And give everyone grace.”

“Summer: The Donna Summer Musical”

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursday

WHERE: Keith Albee Performing Arts Center, Huntington

TICKETS: \$64.42, \$71.00, \$81.97 and \$98.42

INFO: 304-696-6656 or the box office at the Joan C. Edwards Performing Arts Center

