

BY CLAUDIA  
VON DUEHREN

I love New York," gushes Katharine Mehrling. The top star of Berlin's musical stage is coming to Manhattan on Oct. 5, hoping to conquer the Big Apple with her enchanting sound. The award-winning singer and actor will perform her "Streets of Berlin" act at Joe's Pub – a bow to her chosen hometown from the American metropolis that's stolen her heart.

"Over the course of the evening, I say a lot about Berlin, and the audience enjoys it," Mehrling conveys with assurance, having had her concert debut in Manhattan's East Village last year. The singer honed her excellent New York accent in the late 1990s when she attended the renowned Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute. "It was an exciting time, but I also learnt how difficult it is to live as an artist in New York," she recalls. Many of her New York artist friends could make ends meet only by having three or four jobs. She readily admits: "I didn't want that, so I went back to Germany."

It was the beginning of a brilliant career. The linchpin of her success was and is Édith Piaf. The French mistress of the chanson has captivated Mehrling since she was 19 years old. Her first great love, a Frenchman named Jérôme, had given her a cassette tape of songs by Édith Piaf, which were about death, prostitution, love and the stories of simple people and their longing for a better life.

These songs managed to unleash tremendous emotion within Mehrling, so the petite artist, too, wanted to sing with such impact. She recalls: "When I would slide into this character, I would feel an unbelievable identification, a fierce energy. Sometimes it took me days to come up for air. I lived off of her experiences, her life, her travails, her successes, for at that time I was still relatively inexperienced." And so, the 5-foot-1-inch Hessen-born young woman with gobs of talent went on to conquer the German capital as Piaf, becoming the darling of the Berlin stage. This year, for the sixth time, Katharine

Mehrling has received the "Goldene Vorhang" (Golden curtain), the audience award for Berlin's most beloved stage actress.

There's no question that she inherited her talent from her mother, who died of cancer in 2001. Grit von Osthede – as she was known on stage – was a celebrity in her Hessian hometown near Frankfurt, where she ran the music club Tenne. Bands would play there and Mehrling's mother would accompany with song. "Her real name was Margarethe Mehrling," Katharine reveals with a smile. "But she never thought she could get very far with the name Mehrling." So she shortened her first name and added a version of the name of her town as her alias.

While the music played at Tenne, little Katharine would sleep in the apartment just above it, all the while absorbing the nocturnal chansons, jazz and smoky-nigh-seedy atmosphere from below. During daytime, she would sing *Heidi*, gave little performances from a young age and even sang on a Christmas album when she was ten.

Not long after that, her parents sent a demo tape to the German record producer, Ralph Siegel, which ultimately led to the schoolgirl performing at the Eurovision Song Contest Grand Prix as the mini-version of Marianne Rosenberg. After finishing school, she pursued acting and musical theater in London and New York.

But she never stopped thinking about Piaf. The young, exceptionally talented woman read everything she could get her hands on about the "Little Sparrow" from Paris, listened to one after another of her chansons, spent a half-year in Paris and never wavered from following in the footsteps of the French legend.

In the year 2000, Katharine Mehrling finally made her way back to Berlin and rose to become must-see entertainment in the German capital. There was a time when she was an integral part of three ongoing productions: As Sally Bowles in *Cabaret* at the Bar jeder Vernunft, as Judy Garland in the *End of the Rainbow* at Schlosspark Theater and as Daisy the jazz composer in the Komische Oper's *Ball im Savoy*. In 2008, she even landed a gig in

# Spree in New York

Singer Katharine Mehrling returns to Manhattan in style



Katharine Mehrling

the Tom Cruise feature *Valkyrie*; Mehrling played a singer at the officers' club and can be heard on the soundtrack singing "Für eine Nacht voller Seligkeit."

Mehrling's performance in New York will feature her renditions of Kurt Weill (1900–1950) songs and Friedrich Hollaender (1896–1976) tunes from the 1920s. The two artists wrote music history with their compositions for *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Blue Angel*, respectively. Both were forced to flee Germany in the 1933 because of their Jewish heritage. Weill to New York and Hollaender first to Paris, then later to Hollywood.

But of course, audiences can look forward to hearing chansons by Édith Piaf (1915–1963) as well, not to mention songs composed by Katharine Mehrling herself. These will include her newest song "Straßen von Berlin" (Streets of Berlin), the title number for her show at Joe's Pub. The song is an anthem to the feeling of loneliness in the city on the Spree. "There are many people in Berlin who can't seem to engage. In this digital age of ours, they shy away from real communication, perhaps because they think that something better will come their way. I've even experienced this myself," she confesses. This fetching artist was single for quite some time.

Two years ago, however, Mehrling caught the love bug. In the Bar jeder Vernunft, she met her current boyfriend, the actor Tilmar Kuhn. He will accompany her to New York, just as he did last year. But this time they'll be staying at the legendary Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan's theater district. New York's oldest hotel has also played host to artists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Graham Greene, Charles Laughton, Laurence Olivier and Diana Rigg. She can't wait to check in: "We're really looking forward to the special atmosphere of this hotel." And to the question of whether she might tie the knot in the Big Apple, Mehrling laughs: "Édith Piaf also got married in New York. Marlene Dietrich was her matron of honor, but the marriage didn't last five years." ■

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BY PETER ZEHNER

Germans used to be undisputed leaders in the global export of goods, and they've been world champions several times in soccer. In each case, whenever they noticed that their own skills weren't going to be enough, they simply procured foreign muscle to get the job done. In the 20th century, they brought in "guest workers" from Italy, Greece and Turkey to accomplish their "economic miracle," and in the 21st century, they invited talented foreign-born soccer players like Miroslav Klose and Lukas Podolski to help win a World Cup.

These days, Germans are eager to set standards in a new realm: environmental protection. And it would appear they've already started – with garbage in Berlin. Apparently, even the capital's highly capable sanitary workers alone are not able to handle the full extent of the litter left behind by sloppy locals and visitors, which is why a Berlin company, East Berlin Park Cleanup, has come up with a clever idea to help. Sandemans New Europe is a tour company that invites tourists on a tour where participants collect detritus in parks. The district offices of Mitte and Pankow are more than delighted to support the "event," as the company calls it.

In the shining sun of a hot Monday afternoon in late August, 80 people from around the world have come together to clean up Mauerpark, a popular Berlin location for young people looking to

party, enjoy open-air karaoke, play some soccer and basketball, or just take their babies and dogs for a walk.

Matt and Caroline Sullivan are among those who have gathered at the meeting point today, in their case with slightly sweaty and sunburned faces. What prompted them to show up? Why did they come here to pick up other people's trash? "Cause we're mad," they say, laughing, before explaining that they do the same thing at home on the beach in Perth, Australia. "You can't just leave garbage lying around like that," noting that plastic gets flushed into the sea and then eaten by animals. As Matt points out, lobsters eat everything: "These days, people at the Barrier Reef call them sea cockroaches."

Today's event starts with a short, guided tour along the Wall Memorial, an open stretch of terrain with lines marking where the Berlin Wall, the signal fence and the no-man's-land once stood. Participants are told stories and shown where daring East Germans dug tunnels under the Wall and where some people were killed trying to escape.

Then it's on to Mauerpark, where the real fun starts. At the entrance, the organizers hand out vests, plastic bags, gloves and oversized wooden pincers. Participants then set out, usually in small groups of two or three

## Trash tourism

A popular new activity for Berlin visitors: picking up garbage with friends

people. "One person to scout, one to pick up the trash and one to hold the bag," recommends Sandemans CEO David O'Kelly. The groups of young men and women disperse quickly, like ladybirds in search of a place to spend the winter.

Basia and Thomas from Kraków have already participated in a Sandemans tour that morning and immediately accepted the invitation to take part in the current one. Why? "It's free and you get to do something good in the process" – a win-win, they say.

Jialong Kang is from China but lives in Switzerland. "I love

Berlin, and I want to see it clean," he says. One of the other members of his trash-collecting group is 20-year-old Sorvina Carr from Boston. She's been traveling alone through Europe for the past four weeks. "This is a good opportunity to get to know people," she says, picking up a discarded bottle cap.

Amanda and Ben Hopewell are spending part of their last night in Berlin in the park. They laugh a lot. "We're having fun!" they say, noting that the tour only lasts an hour, which means one less hour in the pub. More laughter. Amanda is a teacher,

and she's always telling her pupils to "pick up your garbage!" She simply can't ignore it. The two of them shoot a short video of themselves working in their red vests and send it to their friends, who are obviously already at the pub back in Manchester. Seconds later, they receive a two-word response: "What the...?"

These do-gooders are indeed a jovial and multicultural pack. And lo and behold, there are even some born-and-bred Berliners among them. Elisabeth Okun-robo and her two friends came all the way from the southeast district of Neukölln. The 20-year-

old poli-sci student intends to pursue a career in climate and environmental protection when she's older. At the moment, however, she's busy despairing about all the packaging and shards of glass left by people who – it would appear – love to watch empty beer bottles get smashed on the ground. Elisabeth can't stand all the carelessly discarded cigarette butts either, it's those small pieces of glass and all the other litter that Berlin's motorized garbage sweepers obviously have a hard time collecting that are, she says, "extremely damaging to the global system." Cigarette butts eventually get swept away, she points out, just like the plastic, with all their pollutants being released. It takes 40 liters of water to dispose of a cigarette butt, Elisabeth argues, which is why no one with a conscience can just stand by and let this happen: "We all have to do something to keep Berlin clean."

Sheiku Kappa crouches down and glides his gloved hand over the dry grass and sand. He's originally from Sierra Leone but has been living in Berlin with his German family for almost 20 years. Like on most other nights, he's just been playing soccer, and sometimes he plays basketball here, too. He's seen the red-vested people earlier and decided "to leave my soccer ball with the others and come over to help out. I couldn't just stand around watching foreigners pick up garbage on my field." ■

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Your friendly neighborhood cleaning men and women, global edition (from left to right): Sorvina Carr, Jialong Kang and Catherine Knight