

## Talia Suskauer “Jumps Off the Edge” and Embraces the Mess in Gripping Solo Show Debut



After three years thrilling audiences both around the country and on Broadway, leading the cast of two massive *Wicked* companies in a standout performance as musical theatre’s resident green girl, Elphaba, the burgeoning, beaming beltress Talia Suskauer is finally “flying solo” with her own self-titled show. Or at least she was February 20<sup>th</sup>, when she debuted in a dynamic double header at Midtown hotspot 54 Below.

Daringly declaring she’s had “main character energy since birth,” she speaks specifically of how ever since she can remember, she’s used music as a way to navigate the world. As a kid, she analyzed lyrics and procured playlists, which became more sophisticated as she matured, with songs “for every mood and every situation,” consisting of everything from pump-up jams to wind-down tunes, courtesy of artists such as ABBA, Cat Stevens, Katy Perry and Stephen Sondheim.

And that’s, in a sense, what this concert is: an eclectic selection of music – spanning folk, rock, pop, and, of course, Broadway – that speaks to her in a variety of circumstances and situations, all mixed together and specially molded to fit her sensationally singular voice. She invites us quite literally to jump off the edge... and within seconds of the first number, we willingly take that leap.

As evident from her much-lauded performance as the high-flying do-gooder, there’s no doubt Suskauer possesses some pretty gifted pipes, but what’s most compelling about her

performance here – stripped of green makeup and all the grandiosity of the swankified smash – as she stands alone on a stage, with the opportunity to sing her own set of songs she loves, is how it wholly affirms her ability to act a song. And she’s so electrifyingly captivating and magnificently magnetizing, we just can’t look away. We sit there mesmerized, hanging on every word, sucked in as she sings, boldly, unapologetically, and purely from the heart.

Though there are subtle hints of how each song relates her life nestled within each of her introductions (of note, her lead-in to a haunting medley of “Good Thing Going” and “Not a Day Goes By” hints at a hard-hitting breakup, but doesn’t explicitly state it outright), she lets the song tell the story, fully living in each lyric while vibrantly expressing a range of emotions through what she sings. From joy to elation and anger to frustration, she leaves it all on the stage, raw and real, and makes no apologies.



To boot, she exhibits an impressive, albeit unsurprising, confidence for a debut outing, bested only by her unequivocal enthusiasm and zest for being there, or rather, being *here* on Earth... in this time... in this moment. It’s infectious – bubbling over like champagne and boundlessly spilling onto all of us in the audience. It all makes for a truly unique evening with a truly bona-fide star in the fullest sense of the word.

Helmed by Ari Axelrod – a beloved cabaret figure in his own right – with maestro Mike Stapleton leading the band, highlights of the spirited evening include a robust Mother Medley, showcasing the many instances in community and high school theatre in which she was made the matriarch, a touching tribute to her parents – the “Suskauer yin and yang” – that

emphasizes the importance of carrying on the traditions our parents began with us after we leave them; a scrumptiously satisfying duet with her younger sister; *Kiss Me, Kate’s* “So in Love” as a scintillating samba in a single spot; and a searing, gut-wrenching rendition of “The Music that Makes Me Dance.”

Peppered between her set are quirky tales of playing backseat DJ with her mother’s Billy Joel album in the car as a kid, assisting (and then assuming) the position of dance captain at *Be More Chill* despite claiming to have no skill in that department, manifesting Elphaba on social media for a decade, and generally navigating womanhood, adulthood, independence, and,

perhaps most prominently, uncertainty. (And what's a show headlined by an Elphie without a few good-natured green jokes?)

As she readies to sing her *Wicked* swan song – and admittedly without a clear plan of what's next (“and that is okay!” she reassures us *and* herself, in solidarity with any others out there who may also lack a clear path ahead) – Suskauer allows us to discover who she is beyond the yellow brick road, if you will – while also, whether she knows it or not, discovering herself along the way, honing her inner (and outer) strength, coping with love and loss, embracing independence in all facets, and finding her own way... her own corner of the (Western) sky.

With much of her set list consisting of tunes evoking messages of self-assurance and encouragement, positivity and pushing through the tough stuff in times of crisis (“It’ll all be all right” and “everything in its time” among the favorites), it’s clear she’s a little uncertain herself, and – as she sings – hasn’t “got it figured out just yet.”

But it’s exactly living in that uncertainty, stirring the pot and swimming in the s\*\*t – however messy, uncomfortable, embarrassing or aggravating it may be – that makes life what it is, and it’s okay, as she ultimately concludes, to sometimes not know.

(To that point, she acknowledges, regardless of the good, the bad, or the ugly, “I’ve loved these days” with a built-in toast, urging us all to raise a glass to the days that passed, the days we’re living in, and the days that lie ahead).

And with this show, Suskauer has more than proven she’s got the skills and the smarts to stick it out and make it through. In a telling and somewhat eery section of the show, she plays a video of a four-year-old Talia, dolled up as Dorothy, singing a snippet of that signature song, before encoring with the number in full.

First, it suggests that her fated destiny was perhaps “a vision almost like a prophecy” all along. On the other hand, witnessing the literal before and after, it shows that indeed, as scared as she may be, she’s made it over the rainbow and – while it hasn’t always been easy – bravely paved her own path down the yellow brick road, living proof that “the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.”

“I have always known who I am and what I want,” she says, later in the evening, adding that her strong self-assuredness “has sometimes been off-putting to some people for some reason. But—” she concludes, resolutely, “to me, it means everything — it’s the source of my power.”



She, like the witchy woman she portrays, has closed her eyes and leaped. She's flying free – and flying high – and nobody is ever gonna bring her down. And why *should* they? Her future is, after all, unlimited.

*Talia Suskauer presented her self-titled solo show at 54 Below (254 W. 54<sup>th</sup> Street) on February 20<sup>th</sup>. For more information, visit [www.54below.com](http://www.54below.com).*

**Photo Credit:** Michael Hull