



HOBOKEN TO HOLLYWOOD – Edgemar Center for the Arts – Los Angeles (Santa Monica) Musical Theater Review

by TONY FRANKEL on NOVEMBER 7, 2010
in LOS ANGELES THEATER

THE CURE FOR THE BLUES HAS ARRIVED

I have not been lucky enough to see legendary singers – such as Keely Smith, Dean Martin, or Ella Fitzgerald – perform standards live. Time and again, I am told by people who saw them what magic occurs when an original personality with a distinctive voice interprets songs from the Great American Songbook – a magic that is palpable merely listening to the recordings of live concerts, such as “Judy at Carnegie Hall.” It saddens me that many artists today eschew distinction for a sound that listeners will recognize, such as the ubiquitous yodeling in R&B, or the scratchy, whining wails from coffee-house folk rock. I resigned myself to the fact that I will never have a chance to see such a legend.

Until now.



Crooner Luca Ellis is currently onstage delivering a dizzying display of dazzling standards at The Edgemar in Santa Monica. Don't be deceived by the title *Hoboken to Hollywood* (and the subtitle *A Journey Through the Great American Songbook*) – this hit is much more than a cabaret-styled act that merely delivers tune after tune.

Music director Paul Litteral, director Jeremy Aldridge, and Mr. Ellis co-wrote a book which employs a device so brilliantly simple that it will make writers scratch their heads wondering why they didn't come up with the idea first. We are in a studio, circa 1964, where a television special starring Frank Sinatra is being recorded for broadcast. There is a crew: gopher Andy (Pat Towne), director Dwight (Al Bernstein), Announcer (Chandler Hill), and the beautiful girl, Darlene, who appears in the sponsor's ads (Franci Montgomery). A few of the performances are unnecessarily broad, but that does not detract from the proceedings.

There are working cameras (that transmit the Crooner's image on video screens above our heads) and “applause” signs which, given the perfection of each song, seem as necessary as a clothesline in a nudist camp. Given the mishaps that can occur during the taping of a show, this is a wonderful way to ensure that the audience has time to breathe and re-gather themselves after each number. It also gives us the opportunity to see the infamous temper of Ol' Blue Eyes.

Mr. Ellis (billed as “The Crooner” in the program) appears in the guise of Frank Sinatra, but this is not an impersonation of Frankie; Mr. Ellis IS Frankie. I would even go so far as to say that Mr. Ellis does Frank Sinatra *better* than Frank Sinatra. He is engaging, playful, expressive, charming, quirky, dapper, sexy, and more. Using techniques mastered by Sinatra, Mr. Ellis utilizes masterful phrasing that breathes new life into songs, ones that may have seemed incapable of reinterpretation.

For example, the Hoagy Carmichael/Mitchell Parish standard “Stardust”: this song has been recorded more than 1,500 times, but Mr. Ellis made it seem like he was discovering things about the material (and himself) just as the lyrics escaped his lips. His style elucidated the wistful, melancholic, reflective nature of the tune, and appeared so organic that one may wonder where the tunesmiths leave off and the singer begins.



Another case in point: the set of a bar is wheeled on stage and Luca/Frank had the audience spellbound with his rendition of the Harold Arlen/Johnny Mercer classic, “One for My Baby”; don't be surprised if he wraps his smoky libido around your soul and strokes it into submission. I finally understand what it is to swoon. All singers should take notice that Mr. Ellis acknowledged many of the composers of the 27 songs he sang – now that's professional.

Adding to the professionalism on hand is the Paul Litteral Orchestra, a 12-piece band made up of musicians who mesmerize with their mastery; not only are they smoking hot, but they have some of the greatest faces in show business. There are some nifty arrangements by bandleader Kendall Wallace (although the band is led during the show by Jeff Markgraff as Nelson Riddle). Upright bass player Nicholas Klingenberg may look like he's 20, but he plays with the expertise and dexterity of one who cut his teeth in the Big Band era. I would pay just for the privilege of pianist Paul McDonald's smooth arpeggios and cool phrasing.

Still not convinced to rush off and buy tickets? Consider this: my theatre companions had a particularly bad day, one filled with dreadful news and disparaging reinforcement of this troubling recession. They even wanted to bow out at the last minute...but came. *Hoboken to Hollywood* turned out to be their panacea, for we all left giddy, inspired, and renewed. Those of you who shell out top dollar for a Broadway-type musical with corny songs and saccharine ideals will finally understand what is meant by “feel-good musical.”

This showcase-as-play deserves to run forever – that is, if he is the chairman on board; it is impossible to predict what the show would be like without him. I don't know what the future holds for crooner Luca Ellis: will he end up on Broadway in some Frank Sinatra bio-musical (he's already been seen in Vegas in a Rat Pack Show at the Sahara), or will he become a popular singer without the guise of Sinatra? Wherever this man goes, however, it is unlikely that his venues will get smaller. See him now, while you can, before he is in such demand that you won't be able to afford a ticket.

Photos by James W. Thompson