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Greek Lounge Act

PHOTO BY HAVEN HARTMAN

Sacred Fools' new musical, Louis & Keely Live at the Sahara

BY STEVEN LEIGH MORRIS

You can find several clips of singer-partners Louis Prima and Keely Smith, with a small jazz combo behind them, on YouTube. The pair practically invented the genre of the lounge act, playing as they did during much of the 1950s at the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas, lingering on the margins of fame. Think of them as antecedents to Sonny and Cher, or a musical version of Abbott and Costello. Smith was the "straight-man" woman and long-suffering wife of the hyperactive, philandering Prima, whom you'll see hopping in front of the bandstand like a maniac, throwing his entire body into each beat, a grin plastered across his face, the biggest ham since Hamlet.

Keep these tiny-screen presences in mind when you see Vanessa Claire Smith and Jake Broder's sublime new musical about the duo and their tempestuous life on and off stage, *Louis & Keely Live at the Sahara*. Certainly not the first musical to chronicle a musical group — other recent entries include *Pump Boys and Dinettes* and *Jersey Boys* — this has to be the first one to take a lounge act seriously, rather than as a spittoon for gobs of ridicule.

In a glorious world-premiere production directed by Jeremy Aldridge for Hollywood's Sacred Fools Theater Company, Prima and Smith are re-created with accuracy and richness — perhaps because the writers are also the leading players. Vanessa Claire Smith's cropped brunette 'do apes

that of Keely Smith's, a look that Liza Minnelli adopted later — though the silky, tender singing style of both Smiths couldn't be more contrary to Minnelli's comparatively ostentatious, belting interpretations.

Prima had a more gruff sound than that depicted by Broder, whose sculpted, jazzy tones more closely resemble

Bobby Darin's. What Broder delivers in thunderbolts, though, is Prima's exuberant, maniacal self-choreography — leaping, lurching, swaying and sashaying. Why this guy is jumping around so much becomes the musical's central question. The answer to that question could come with dismissing Prima as a narcissistic clown. The creators, however, treat their subject with far more compassion than that, as Prima's plight approaches tragedy. (Broder played Mozart in the Broadway production of *Amadeus*, which provides a small window onto the vainglorious hysteria that Broder depicts here so brilliantly.) He croons in musical styles from '20s Dixieland jazz through '30s swing, '40s big band and '50s scat — and their accompanying lingo ("cats," "chicks" and "gigs"). Broder's song-and-dance routine, capturing Prima's cocky romantic domination over Smith, as well as his solipsistic devotion to his music, is a bravura performance not to be missed.

What may first look like a musical comedy is actually a **musical tragedy, ancient Greek style: the deluded protagonist who's undone by hubris and sent into exile.**

And having an onstage, seven-piece backup band (doubling as supporting players) augments the impact, particularly with sounds so carefully modulated by musical director Dennis Kaye. A piano, two saxophones, a string bass, drum set, a trumpet and trombone, all on the stage of this 99-seat theater, places us in the equivalent of a small recording studio. When the band hits its stride with enveloping riffs of Dixieland blues and big-band stylings, hang on to your seat. The musical current is that strong.

This journey through Prima's life comes on the eve of his death in 1978. (Smith is still alive and thriving.) Though it sweeps in biographical details from the '20s — his "craziness," he says, captured hearts during the Great Depression — the story kicks into gear during the late '40s with its *A Star Is Born* plot featuring Smith as the ingenue who saves Prima's foundering big-band act and resurrects it with a '50s spin in Las Vegas. And though he's doing all the

jumping and prancing, and giving all the orders, the newspaper reviews focus on her talents, not his. Prima's jealousy erupts, not so much in offstage screaming matches (he barely speaks to her) but in the tensions that escalate on the stage, which everyone can see, and which perversely renders their act more popular. He actually encourages the onstage hostility, for just that reason.

And so, through 16 songs (ranging from "Basin Street Blues," "That Old Black Magic," and "I've Got You Under My Skin" to the song that defined Prima's career, the medley of "Just a Gigolo" and "I Ain't Got Nobody") one passionate love and cruel marriage is played out almost entirely between the lines. If the purpose of musical theater is to express in song what can't be expressed in mere words, this is about as perfect as a musical can get. It's simple without being simplistic, summing up 80 years of gender relations in 90 minutes. Yet this is not just a musical about men and women but about life, and art as an expression of it; the devastating costs of recklessly turning a private life into a public one; and that old, blinding obsession with fame.

Smith's desperate words accompany her tortured decision to leave her husband, "Life is happening right in your face and you don't even notice. You don't hear anything unless it's in the key of B flat!"

I walked out of the theater wrenched by a depth of emotion that seemed to make no sense, coming from a musical about the quaint saga of an almost forgotten lounge act. That's when I realized I'd been punched in the gut and didn't even know it. It was a delayed reaction to the blow landed in Broder's reprise of "I Ain't Got Nobody." He just kept on singing that refrain, as the band packed up and left him there, until his death bed slowly rolled in.

What may first look like a musical comedy is actually a musical tragedy, ancient Greek style: the deluded protagonist who's undone by hubris and sent into exile.

Exile was a bad end for Oedipus, but imagine if Oedipus' delusions included eternal celebrity from a Las Vegas lounge act.

The program cover contains the slogan, "Nothing lasts forever."

I hope this show does. ■

LOUIS & KEELY LIVE AT THE SAHARA | By VANESSA CLAIRE SMITH and JAKE BRODER | Presented by SACRED FOOLS THEATER COMPANY, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hollywood | Through June 29 | (310) 281-8337 or www.sacredfools.org

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