

## [ Legit Review ]

### Louis & Keely Live at the Sahara

(Sacred Fools Theater; 99 seats; \$25)

A Sacred Fools Theater Company presentation of a world premiere of a musical in one act, written by Vanessa Claire Smith and Jake Broder. Directed by Jeremy Aldridge. musical director, Dennis Kaye; sets, Dave Knutson; lighting, Heatherlynn Gonzalez; sound, Jaime Robledo; costumes, Kat Bardot; stage manager, Suze Campagna. Opened May 30, 2008; reviewed June 7; closes June 29. Running time: 85 MIN.

Keely Smith ..... Vanessa Claire Smith  
Louis Prima ..... Jake Broder  
Doc ..... Dennis Kaye  
Sam Butera ..... Colin Kupka  
Pee Wee ..... Richard Levinson  
Soup ..... Paul Litteral  
Eddie ..... Jeff Markgraf  
Rocko ..... Michael L. Solomon  
Jimmy ..... Brian Wallis

By PHIL GALLO

A swinging romp that parallels a Greek tragedy, Vanessa Claire Smith and Jake Broder have neatly placed a biography within a Vegas lounge act to create a bio-tuner that is often riveting and deserving of further development. "Louis & Keely Live at the Sahara" emphasizes story and performance far above impersonation, which gives the piece a bit of "Jersey Boys"-like



Jake Broder and Vanessa Claire Smith star in the one-act biotuner "Louis & Keely Live at the Sahara."

appeal: Regardless of the auds' familiarity with the music or the personas, the substance here is a story of love, fame, jealousy and broken hearts.

What distinguishes "Louis & Keely" is its exploration of the pitfalls of maintaining no separation between showroom and the home, how Louis Prima stayed keenly focused on satisfying an audience even as it destroyed his family. The love of a wife can't compare to the affection he cherishes from his mother and the sound of applause, which ultimately pushed away Keely Smith, a situation incompre-

hensible to the star. It's both the most sharply written and performed section of the show.

Prima, whose legacy has been revived by the Gap, Brian Setzer and David Lee Roth, was keenly aware that he needed to continually alter his act to keep seats filled. His younger days in New Orleans were spent as a traditional jazz trumpeter; he was an originator of swing in the 1930s in New York; he recorded Italian novelty tunes in the 1940s with his big band and became one of America's most popular entertainers; and, in the 1950s,

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he downsized to a combo and created a lively, raucous integration of all the styles he had covered in his first 20 years in music.

"Louis & Keely" covers all of this biography between, and sometimes in the middle of, his signature songs: "Basin Street Blues," "Angelina," "Sheik of Araby" and "That Old Black Magic." Prima, when the show opens, has been in a coma for two years. It is 1978, the year of his death, and with the snap of his fingers, the calendar rolls back 30 years to an artistic crossroads for the gravelly voiced Italian singer, who at the time of his death was best known for the Disney pic "The Jungle Book."

Broder, as Prima, uses the finger snapping to shift between biographical and musical memories; Heatherlynn Gonzalez's lighting pinpoints the action with clarity and makes the stage, set up as a bandstand, feel like a multitude of locations.

Broder sets up the Prima milieu quickly: Mom runs the business from home; he's a womanizer involved in yet another divorce; he senses his act is aging and needs a spark, the easiest solution being to add yet another girl

as a backup singer.

Enter Dorothy Keely (Vanessa Claire Smith), a 16-year-old thrush who impresses Prima immediately. Prima hires her, instantly changes her name to Keely Smith and takes on a Svengali role.

That ultimately informs their life on and off the stage, and a good hour of "Louis & Keely" explores the ramifications of one individual establishing and enforcing ground rules for another. Smith becomes his bride at 18 — he was in his early 40s — and, by her mid-20s, a potential star trapped by the Prima style, which critics have begun to harp on.

Packing all of the information into less than 90 minutes means sacrificing a bit of biographical clarity, the strenuousness of the Vegas work and the initial emotional connection between Prima and Smith.

And while it is abundantly clear that Prima wanted Smith to play deadpan and act like the two were fighting — they were a musical version of Ralph and Alice Kramden and the model for Sonny & Cher — we never see the humor in full bloom. Were the tuner extended in length, the story could have more dynamics; currently the only modulation comes in moments of anger.

Ostensibly a two-hander with an onstage band that emphatically jumps, jives and wails, Broder captures the manic wildness of Prima's stage antics, a choreography based on

the moves of boxers and monkeys in trees. Smith, as Keely Smith, makes an impressive transformation from awestruck teen to angry and confused mother. Her role, as well as that of saxophonist Sam Butera (Colin Kupka, a better musician than actor), could be easily expanded.

Her "Embraceable You" with Prima's interjections is the evening's spot-on perf though neither Broder nor Smith has the vocal personalities of Louis & Keely. Prima was a nimble singer who squeezed his bellowing voice into a register higher than his natural tenor-baritone. Broder has a good voice but a smaller range and far less gravel. He gets high marks for his command of the often-wordy Prima delivery style.

Keely Smith is a tougher nut vocally, a unique blend of jazz and pop that caressed the listener. There's an appropriate onstage coldness that Vanessa Claire Smith plays well that extends to her vocals with less success; the contrast between Smith's aloofness and the warmth of her singing has not been wholly captured here. The Prima-Smith vocal mix was one of divergent parts that made little sense in theory. The distinction between the two vocalists could be driven home with a bit more force.

Jeremy Aldridge's direction is as compact and tight as the script, making good use of the entire space to isolate private moments on the sides and place the public lives front and center.