

THE MOVABLE BUFFET

DISPATCHES FROM LAS VEGAS BY RICHARD ABOWITZ

Clint Holmes Gets Real



Last week I went to the Nevada Conservatory Theatre at UNLV. This section of Vegas is not my usual haunt, but I certainly felt on familiar ground looking around. Norm Clarke and Mile Weatherford from Review-Journal were there. Fellow blogger Robin Leach was there, too. Mirage headliner Danny Gans walked past me as did the former lieutenant governor of Nevada/lounge singer Lorraine Hunt. The reason everyone was there was to see a premiere of "Just Another Man." This musical, planned ultimately for the theatre in London or New York, was created and stars former Harrah's headliner Clint Holmes and features veterans from a variety of other Strip productions.

Clint Holmes has spent a lifetime on stage making people feel good. He has charisma, a great voice and enough brushes with fame to have an impressive resume (a novelty hit single in the 70's, "Playground in My mind," a stint as a sidekick on the Joan Rivers television show, as well as being a correspondent for Entertainment Tonight). As a headliner at Harrah's, Holmes' show, on the surface at least, was classic Vegas old school entertainment. Holmes mixed hits, standards and originals with enough charming palaver to endear himself to audiences largely unfamiliar with his name when they sat down in his showroom. Yet, he earned himself standing ovations night after night. Over time the Holmes' show evolved adding more original songs and telling the back story of the entertainer's life. The narrative arc tracked Holmes' family saga, an extraordinary one, dating back to World War Two. During the war, his father, an African-American jazz cat of a GI and his mom, a white British opera singer, fell in love and married. They returned to the United States with hopes of freedom, happiness and community in a country where miscegenation was still illegal in many States.

Holmes grew up along with his sister as the only mixed race kids in a small town near Buffalo, New York. (He is now in the Buffalo Musical Hall of Fame.) Holmes' Harrah's show was a feel good embrace centering on how his success and love of music triumphed above all the adversity to the diversity of his family. At one point, during the Holmes show at Harrah's, a photo was projected on a large screen to the audience of his elderly parents smiling arm-in-arm. On special nights, if Holmes mother was present, she would often join Holmes on stage at Harrah's and, though almost 90, offer a still marvelous operatic take on Gershwin's "Summertime." In many ways, the story was less about how real life goes and more about Vegas. Everyone in Clint Holmes-land lives happily everafter and everyone in the audience felt uplifted by the experience of seeing the Clint Holmes' show.

But in "Just Another Man" the fictionalized Holmes, Rei Coles (played by Clint Holmes), family faces a much more complex reality throughout the more than two hour (with intermission) musical. Take the romantic meeting of Holmes' parents in England. In this version, Coles' mother, a British opera singer, is married to another man when she meets her jazz loving American GI, and she is pregnant (with Rei Coles) before marrying him--not to mention being disowned by her English family. None of these details, if autobiographical, ever came out on the stage at Harrah's. "Just Another Man," in this way, though fictionalized, feels like all of the real things swept under the rug at the Clint Holmes' Vegas show leaping out and demanding the attention they were long denied onstage.

The frame is a triangle as headliner Coles undergoes cancer surgery, does his Vegas show and relives the significant events in his life. At moments the triangle is magnificent and at other times confusing. But that isn't a complaint. Life is confusing and "Just Another Man" could better have been called "Just Another Life." In fact, there is nothing typical about a man with Holmes' talents who grows up to become a headliner in Vegas. Yet, underneath the talent and drive, what Coles discovers in "Just Another man" is that in truth, he is living just another life: trying to adjust to being a parent, reconcile with his own childhood as well as advance his career and save his marriage. By the end of the show, Coles is older and wiser and his life, just like real life, is still a confusing mess. Yet, he is happy because he has a little more time left to live it. So, while I would tweak here and there, overall this is a show about life being messy and that requires some dramatic mess.

Vegas may be a setting for part of the show, but "Just Another Man" is not a Vegas show in anyway. Already, the original songs are melodic and clever enough to stand alone. With some edits and changes, this show has the potential to be brilliant musical theatre. I hope there is an audience for that; such an audience certainly is not in Vegas. So much so, I could not help wondering what the rest of the people in the room were thinking? I admit, while I was very worried going in to "Just Another Man" about schmaltz, I left hoping for nothing more than this musical finding an audience who can appreciate it.

Not that things are perfect. Work and tweaks are clearly needed. There is a serious problem at the ending (a final pointless song destroying the mood and the punch of the

Carpe Diem final dialogue complete with fade to black). In the first half, Clint Holmes, is unconvincing as the young Rei Coles (I cringed when he almost kissed his college girlfriend who looked to be an actress in her teens). But who but Holmes can play such an autobiographical role in the second act?

The answer: I am sure New York and London can roundup the kind of singing, dancing and acting talents to pull this show off flawlessly. But, as this is Vegas, everyone in the cast was stronger on performing, dancing and singing than the moments that called for dramatic acting. One exception was Earl Turner who as an actor and singer was amazing and very poignant as Coles' father. In real life, Turner is one of the should-have-beens of Vegas headliners whose show at the Rio never enjoyed a following as large as his talent. I cried (real physical tears) as Turner's character died onstage with everything unresolved with his famous son. There was sheer beauty, complexity and honesty in his performance. In fact, that is true of the entire show, I have never seen such a deep accounting of why and how being a headliner in Vegas happens in terms of ego and id. But it is also a story about regular people, and how life does really pass you by and you wind up with compromises, unresolved issues and it all ends in a sprint to death.

As you can tell, on the whole, this was nothing like what I expected from Clint Holmes: a musical "The Pittsburgh Cycle" out of suburban Buffalo. My sense of commercial audiences has been warped by Vegas and by truths like the never exceed 90 minute rule for show length. But in Vegas people are fitting a lot into a vacation. The rules on Broadway are different. And, "Just Another Man" might fit and win in a world where an audience is able to arrive and appreciate "Jersey Boys," "The Color Purple" or plays by David Mamet and Sam Shepard. I just never thought Clint Holmes was the sort of artist to go there. I am really proud of him for that.

Just after the show, an exhausted Holmes told me: "When I had cancer it felt like I woke up. A lot of people had a lot of expectations about what I should do. But I found it is the hardest thing in the world to do what I want to do. There is a lot in my life right now and has been my life and this show is honest."

I wish him luck with "Just Another Man." So often Vegas headliners remain trapped in their onstage character. For Holmes to turn the tables and trap the character into a theatrical show really makes for a fascinating experience.
(photo by Sarah Gerke)

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