

Talkin' Broadway's Broadway Reviews

Liza's at the Palace

Theatre Review by [Matthew Murray](#) - December 3, 2008

Liza's at the Palace.... Starring Liza Minnelli. Directed and choreographed by Ron Lewis. Featuring Johnny Rodgers, Cortés Alexander, Jim Caruso, Tiger Martina. Scenic design by Ray Klausen. Lighting design by Matt Beman. Sound design by Matt Kraus. Technical Supervisor Fred Gallo. Musical Producer Phil Ramone. Vocal Arrangements by Kay Thompson & Billy Stritch. Music Supervisor Billy Stritch. Conductor/Drummer Michael Berkowitz. Additional material by David Zippel.

Theatre: Palace Theatre, 1564 Broadway at 47th Street

Running time: _ hours _ minutes, including one intermission

Schedule: Through December 28. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday at 8 pm, Sunday at 3 pm

Ticket prices: \$55, \$100, and \$125

Tickets: [Ticketmaster](#)

Only some titanic rearrangement of the laws of arithmetic, or perhaps a disruption in the space-time continuum, could explain the tempestuous violation of temporal logic that's resulted in the vortex of pure show-biz at the Palace. The woman immersed in it all looks a lot like Liza Minnelli: the drawn kewpie-doll face, the elegantly mussed bowl of hair, the eyes alight with weary playfulness. But that dancing! That emoting! And especially that singing! Isn't this really an exquisite impersonator 40 years the real Minnelli's junior?

Amazingly, no - and in a way, it's too bad. If this entertainment extravaganza, called *Liza's at the Palace....*, were being performed by someone on her ascent, there would be less reason to fear for the future of theatrical charisma. This is the real deal, the real legend, the real old-school way of doing things, where performers forge intimate bonds in the biggest and brashest of settings. So what if your eyes and ears sometimes suggest that this icon is past her prime - when she can control a crowd by twirling a fingernail or fluttering an eyelid, sustain a note with throbbing passion, and squeeze feelings dry, who cares?

Directed and choreographed with gold-lamé slickness by Ron Lewis, this show is perhaps the ultimate tribute to ultimate tributes - so elaborate and unapologetic in framing its subject that it borders on shameless. What is never in sight, however, is dishonesty. Everything is carefully calculated, whether to arouse sympathy or dampen memories of Minnelli's addictive and injurious past or her last Palace show (*Minnelli on Minnelli*, in 1999). Yet the show never lets you catch your breath long enough to feel manipulated.

"Nobody has the right to be the judge of what is right for me," she growls during "What Makes a Man?", Charles Aznavour's paean to secure self-identity. It's her theme statement here, the dramatic anchor for the three vivid - and very different - characters she embodies: Liza Minnelli, her godmother (and vocal goddess) Kay Thompson, and a humble headliner alone in the crowd with her dotting public. Each personality is grossly overplayed, glitteringly unconvincing, and impossibly irreplaceable.

This is especially true when she's playing herself in the first act, delving into her innate romanticism with the liquid-smoky "I Would Never Leave You" (written by her pianist and vocal arranger Billy Stritch, with Johnny Rodgers and Brian Lane Green), but mocking it with Jule Styne, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green's "If You Hadn't, But You Did," becoming a woman who literally murders the man who done her wrong. A "Palace Medley" ties Minnelli to a decades-old tradition of top-tier talent, the likes of which sang "Shine on Harvest Moon," "Some of These Days" (for which her voice takes on an unearthly earthiness), and "My Man."

But it's her iconic roles from John Kander and Fred Ebb musicals - *Chicago's* Roxie Hart and *Cabaret's* Sally Bowles - that give the act its center. You'll notice a rockiness in Minnelli's vocals now that implies more daring, danger, and erosion than used to be the case. But 35 additional years have given an added poignancy to her search for love ("Maybe This Time"), self-reliance ("I Am My Own Best Friend"), or day-to-day fulfillment ("Cabaret"). When she transparently changes that song's lyrical climax to "When I go, I'm *not* going like Elsie," you utterly believe her as no longer needing to hide behind herself.

So when Minnelli "becomes" her godmother Thompson post-intermission, the transformation doesn't feel false. She slips into Thompson's perpetual-motion performance style easily, her feet and constitution more than matching the grueling demands of nonstop sequences from Thompson's renowned club act with the Williams Brothers (played with synchronized panache by Rodgers, Cortés Alexander, Jim Caruso, and Tiger Martina). During "Jubilee Time" and "I Love a Violin" (Thompson), "Basin Street Blues" (Spencer Williams and Thompson), and "Clap Yo' Hands" (George and Ira Gershwin), you're most aware of Minnelli's bottomless fuel reserves. The numbers are excitingly exhausting to watch, but Minnelli doesn't just survive them, she triumphs over them - usually somewhat winded, but invariably in complete command of her body and the stage.

Those qualities are most important for her third and final portrayal: the star at the mercy of both herself and the audience. She's competing with the history she's created and that they love, so how can she not give them a little of what they want most? Minnelli's signature spots "And the World Goes 'Round" and the theme from "New York, New York" (both Kander and Ebb again) may be shopworn, and verging on cliché, but she owns them and dispenses them in a way that precludes disappointment. If they're more mannered now than once they were, they score for that simplest and most captivating of reasons: The singer demands it.

Being in the presence of anyone like this is a rarity in today's theatre, but there's nothing like it - and there's nothing like Minnelli. Whatever she's singing and whoever she's playing - whether the sophisticated and adult Thompson, or the lovestruck girl of "He's Funny That Way" (Neil Moret/Richard Whiting) who reclines in a chair with her legs delicately crossed - she's no mere force of nature, she's a force of the universe. Given what she does in *Liza's at the Palace....*, one cannot imagine 2008 going out with a bigger or more heavenly bang.



Liza Minnelli
Liza's at the Palace