

# PHENOMENAL

## LEGENDARY DIVAS

Ali Harper

Musical directors: Richard Marrett (Christchurch); David Sidwell (Hamilton +)

at SIT Centrestage Theatre, Invercargill

12 May 2016

[1hr 20mins (no interval)]

Reviewed by Jane Milne, 14 May 2016

Tonight I am expecting to be wowed and wowed I am. Ali gives each Diva the justice they deserve with an outstanding performance. Her range is amazing, not just in the songs she sings but in the different tones her voice brilliantly reaches.

Pianist David Sidwell introduces Ali Harper who waltzes in wearing a clingy dress with a pattern depicting chains on it: a nod to Janis Joplin's classic 'Ball and Chains'; a reference to the fact that every Diva must take the good and bad that comes with being famous? Maybe it means nothing. Regardless the dress is stunning and Ali looks every inch the Diva.

A fun and brilliant Motown Medley starts up with 'Baby Love', 'Stop in the Name of Love', 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough'; we are bobbing in our seats, hooked.

The audience is asked to think of music that has touched, healed or inspired us. Music that conjures up memories; first heart break perhaps? As 'Anyone Who Had a Heart', a Cilla Black number, rings out many of us think of that first guy or girl who broke our heart. We recall when we wanted to escape from reality as the 'Bohemian Rhapsody' fills our ears; her one nod (fittingly it seems) to a male Diva. Ali reaches each note perfectly.

The scenery is mentioned, or lack of it: the backdrop is black with a piano on the left of the stage, a chair near the back middle and a microphone at the front. "Who needs scenery," Ali asks us, "when I have a silver fox?" Yes, true, and who needs scenery when you have a Diva commanding the stage? 'No Business Like Show Business' rings out giving, us goose bumps.

We are asked to ponder the definition of Diva, about which we are given some interesting facts. Ali asks, "Do I look like a challenge to you?" More than a few men reply, "Yes!" bringing raucous laughter.

Diva, we learn, has some really positive connotations including "Devine one". Ali breaks into some pretty fantastic opera high notes ... David on the piano and Ali have been friends for a long time and it shows in their funny banter. His piano-playing skills really complement Ali's singing.

The delightful Doris Day song 'Magic' is magic for us! We hear a hilarious story about Barbara Streisand having once slept in the room Ali was about to stay in for her wedding. Ali appears to have endless entertaining and interesting tales to tell. And her laugh is absolutely contagious.

Ali hits all the right notes with Julie Andrews' 'I Couldn't Teach the Note', perfectly articulated in a high

English Accent. We are treated to some lip-syncing: it appears David can sing too.

‘Don’t Cry for Me Argentina’ starts up honouring amazing women and all of the leading ladies who have played Eva in *Evita*. She does this song complete justice. The audience is star-struck, tears moisten the corner of some eyes.

Next Ali informs us that Etta James said “even if a song has been done a thousand times, you can still bring something of your own to it.” She launches into her own beautiful rendition of ‘Send in the Clowns’, written for the 1973 musical *A little Night Music*, where the character Desirée reflects on the ironies and disappointments of her life.

From this very moving and touching performance an imaginary scene is set for us; its 1986 in Alis bedroom and she is wearing leg warmers; a scene many a teenage girl can relate to regardless of the music of their era and whether or not leg warmers were in; a fan is on, the music is upbeat and we have a mash up of whole array of fun fast music starting with; “Now I hear the music close my eyes I am rhythm” from the song ‘What a Feeling’.

As the music goes through an array of fun 80s music, Ali starts to walk up the aisle into the audience. The conservative Invercargill crowd shrinks into their seats, not wanting to be singled out yet wanting to. One guy gets chosen, much to the disappointment of many a man in the room I am sure, as Ali sings to him ...

Back to the stage, Ali blasts out Madonna’s ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’ and Donna Weiss’ ‘She has Betty Davis Eyes’. From the heavenly high notes of *Evita* to the upbeat sound of the iconic Princess of Pop Madonna, Ali nails them all in voice and style.

After interval Ali is dressed as a Lady in Red (wow I wish I could rock a red dress like that) and – wearing stunning diamonds on her wrist, ears and the centre line at the top of her dress – sings ‘Diamonds are Forever’ and continues through some other James Bond chart toppers: every inch the Bond girl with a sensual voice to match.

We are treated to more Divas with great quotes from them and brilliant medleys of their songs: Janis Joplin; Dolly Parton (The Dolly Parody is hilarious Ali appears to look at me as she says in a southern drawl “make sure you write this down”); Judi Garland; Edith Piaf.

Back into the audience Ali goes with an eye on her first half target but he has bonded himself into the seat so a nearby Hugh, after much convincing, gets up. Ali has him side stepping finger clicking and bobbing with her ... The fact that she can reach the octaves of Celine Dion and the depth of folk portrayed by Dusty Springfield doesn’t cease to amaze.

Ali doesn’t let the rest of us off lightly, imploring us to join her in a Carole King song as she sits with David at the piano: ‘You’ve Got a Friend’. The audience gets right into this, which is a step out of the normal for this cautious southern crowd.

Ali is up moving for (you make me feel like a) ‘Natural Woman’, inviting even the men to join in; what happens in the theatre stays in the theatre so my lips are sealed as to whether I heard any male voices joining in.

Ali dedicates the last song – ‘Quiet Please There’s a Lady On the Stage’ – to the Divas who are no longer with us as a TV appears and the Divas photos and names pass across the screen

“Put your hands together”: we have witnessed a Diva tonight.

We are thinking the journey through amazing music of so many talented Divas performed by one very gifted Ali Harper is over when she bounces back on stage and has us up dancing to her encore medley.

Post-show, the foyer is a-buzz with people buying CDs talking to Ali and her husband and discussing the show: “Wonderful”, “What a treat” and “Phenomenal”.

Phenomenal it was with David’s excellent piano playing and Ali singing a huge range. Ali is a star! Ali is a Diva!

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