

Kiki and Herb : Alive On Broadway

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Kiki and Herb

If Helen Lawson were not just merely a fictional gay icon, she probably would have rolled over in her grave last week. You see, it turns out Broadway *does* go for the booze after all, at least when it's the equally imaginary Kiki & Herb doing the drinking on stage. Opening last Tuesday night at the Helen Hayes Theatre, "Kiki & Herb: Alive on Broadway" found the famously twisted downtown duo unleashing their latest debauched cabaret act on the Great White Way. Following in drag legend Dame Edna's oversized orthopedic footsteps, the provocative performers aptly demonstrated that there's room for more

than one geriatric cross-dressing diva who can both sell out and then bring down the house.

For the unacquainted, Kiki DuRane is the "brash, boozy septuagenarian chanteuse" portrayed by comic mastermind Justin Bond whose larger-than-life persona, outrageously sordid life's experiences and unabashed penchant for song all meld together to form an unlikely but perfectly twisted performance the audience won't soon forget (even if Kiki will).

Kenny Mellman excels on the piano, playing the part of trusted musical sidekick Herb, a gay, retarded Jew whom Kiki purports to have met at the Erie Children's Institutional back in the 1930s. That is before this show's revelation that their first encounter actually occurred back in biblical times during the birth of Christ. We later learn the reason they didn't die back in 2004, as promised following their farewell concert, "Kiki & Herb Will Die for You," was simply out of their control: an unanticipated gift/curse was bestowed upon them by a pet cow that had ingested the baby Jesus's placenta and passed along immortality to a starving Kiki & Herb through its milk. Seriously. And this wasn't even the most preposterous tale offered throughout the evening.

Kiki & Herb have come a long way from the East Village dives and fringe festival stages where they honed their act and developed their characters throughout the 90s. The Broadway stage doesn't seem quite so unlikely, though, considering recent past runs at The Royal Albert Hall, the Sydney Opera House and their aforementioned "farewell" concert back in 2004 at Carnegie Hall.

Mining laughs from all across the comedic spectrum, Kiki, a dead-ringer for Florida congresswoman Katherine Harris, skillfully interwove highbrow humor with outrageous one-liners, physical antics with philosophical ponderings. Drawing from an equally wide range of cultural and historical references juxtaposed with current events and social attitudes, "Alive" was interspersed with an eclectic repertoire that included selections by Public Enemy, Dan Fogelberg and the Scissor Sisters.

Some of it worked, some of it not so much. But even if the more obscure songs and inside jokes flew over my head, those moments were few enough to have adversely affected the show's overall momentum. The singing was no more or less tolerable than Dame Edna's, but there was definitely too much of it. Clocking in at 2 hours and 20 minutes, including intermission, the performance could have benefited greatly by sheering off about 30 minutes, or just dropping the second act entirely.

Of course, the latter would have deprived us of one of Kiki's more biting political commentaries, as well as her guilt-laden war treatise and call to arms that ended with her declaring of the Iraq war, "Not that *I'm* going to do anything about it. But you should all at least be worried about it." Or something to that effect.

Then the show just kind of lost its focus for a while until Kiki belted out the opening lines of Pat Benetar's "Love Is a Battlefield." That segued into what is perhaps their most popular and beloved mock-ups, an amped-up version of Bonnie Tyler's power ballad, "Total Eclipse of the Heart," that whipped the entertainers and the audience into a frenzy.

While the songs tell their own story, it's when Kiki shares her irreverent observations on life -- from a progressively inebriated perspective, of course -- that the show truly shines. It would have also been nice had Herb not screamed most of his thankfully few vocals into the microphone (part of the shtick, perhaps, but still annoying and terribly distracting).

Faithful fans of Kiki & Herb will surely find "Alive" to be the perfect evolution of the duo's act that once played in what Michael Musto described as "welfare hotels." But will it play as well to audiences who can easily afford the high ticket price but aren't so familiar with their act? Probably not. But maybe that's okay, it's just more fodder for Kiki & Herb's next show.

"To be perfectly honest, I don't care if we flop. I don't care if we're a bomb on Broadway," Bond admitted in a press meet-n-greet prior to the show's four-week run. "We can spend the rest of our lives talking about when we flopped on Broadway. The main thing is that we can say that we did it."

When life gives you lemons, make Lemon Daiquiris.

Kiki & Herb: Alive on Broadway runs through Sept. 10 at the Helen Hayes Theater. Tickets are \$87.50 and are available by calling (212) 239-6200. For more information, please visit www.kikiandherb.com.

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