

After Dark with John Høglund

Arnaldo in "Just An Old Fashioned Girl"

September 2007 - The Duplex, NY

Because it's so easy to rely on the overextension of camp, shows by female impersonators always risk being redundant and sometimes tasteless. With rare exceptions like the late Charles Pierce and others of his ilk, who depended mainly on over-exaggerated spoofs of famous ladies, the creator's imagination gets as far as the maquillage and stops, as though painting their faces and dressing up were enough. Consequently, the act gets stuck at some bar room level, without the intelligence and entertainment value that would make it fly in cabaret. Not so here.



Arnaldo is not just another drag act. Arnaldo is "Just An Old Fashioned Girl" and about as close to an old time night club chanteuse as we're likely to find on today's scene. Armed with an hour's worth of well-chosen songs, fun banter and laid back ease with an audience, this drag is no drag. He's the real deal in a world where prejudices and quick judgements are too often the norm. Not since Clinton Leupp made his sensation debut as "Miss Coco Peru" in 1992 at Rose's Turn and later Eighty Eight's has a man in drag left such an impact in a cabaret debut. However, Leupp created a gay character that propelled him to instant recognition locally in a carefully scripted act that was delivered with a mix of camp and high drama that worked for the underpinning of a complicated tale of happy and sad experiences. Eschewing all that, Arnaldo is simply an entertainer with a future who fully engages his audience.

Looking beautiful in a satin peach gown with a flowing chiffon wrap, he sang standards and novelty songs that had his adoring fans (many had flown in from his native Seattle) cheering throughout his well balanced set. With musical director Bob Bruneau and a guest solo spot with talented thrush Jenna Esposito, the delightful show made for one of the most unpretentious, high quality acts to emerge from Gotham nightlife in awhile that even gravitates more toward Rosemary Clooney or Ella Fitzgerald in its good taste in song and substance which he notes early on adding, " ... well, I'm not influenced by Britney Spears or Paris Hilton!"

He has fun with "I'm Just An Old Fashioned Girl" (Marve Fisher) and "I Enjoy Being a Girl" (Rogers and Hammerstein II) and he also notes, " I also like Chopin and Bizet and the songs of yesterday." The room exploded in side-splitting laughter with his one recklessly over the top comedy number singing "She's Got You" (Cochran) aided by a seemingly endless stream of bizarre and kinky props hidden beneath the ball gown he has changed to.

But it was on the more serious songs that you knew this was a special artist with depth and intelligence on classics like "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" (Rodgers and Hart) and the Piaf classic "Hymne a l'amour" (Piaf-Monnot.) On such moments, it was like watching one of yesteryear's femmes caught up in the rapture of romance in a smoky nightclub from an old movie.

In closing, he noted with humility, "It all started with a dream in the cabaret rooms of Seattle. I hope what I do open some minds and hearts to keep believing in spite of the prejudices that still exist in our society." It led to a heartfelt reading of "If You Believe" (Smalls.) This was a significant debut by a "drag chanteuse" worthy of top billing at any major hotel or casino showroom.

