

Louis & Keely, together again



FUNDING WAS KEY: Writer-performers Jake Broder and Vanessa Claire Smith overcame many obstacles to tell the story of the popular 1950s Vegas act.

By Charlotte Stoudt, Special to The Times
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SHE WAS Martin to his Lewis, a shrug to his stampede. Singers Louis Prima and Keely Smith packed Vegas houses in the 1950s with their droll cabaret show. They were Punch and Judy for the cocktail set, a witty cold war waged between Smith's seeming disdain and Prima's hepcat eagerness. Their chemistry has sparked a vibrant new tribute, "Louis & Keely: Live at the Sahara," at Sacred Fools Theater Company.

Writer-performers Vanessa Claire Smith and Jake Broder, working with director Jeremy Aldridge and a seven-piece combo, serve up a lounge act that deconstructs itself in mid-performance, a dissonant love story and jazz hit list, all in 90 hyperkinetic minutes of song and dance.

"Louis & Keely" has the go-for-broke vibe of a show that almost didn't happen -- twice. Smith (no relation to Keely), raised in New Orleans, had long wanted to write about fellow Crescent City native Prima, but had never found the right format.

"I was on a total career down-slide," Smith says of her recent years in L.A. "I was mentally preparing myself to move back home to Louisiana. I'd been through a divorce." In fall 2006, she'd given notice from her job mixing drinks at the M Bar, but decided to fill in for one last shift after another bartender got sick.

That evening, Broder was performing "Lord Buckley in Los Angeles," a cabaret about the groundbreaking monologist who influenced Bob Dylan and many others. "I watched Jake perform and . . . I couldn't believe it: This was my Louis Prima," Smith says. "Jake's agent and manager happened to be sitting at the bar, so I started telling them about my idea."

Broder laughs. "I thought the whole thing was finished -- she even had a flier. Then she told me she hadn't written it yet."

Star-crossed partners

THE FAMOUSLY Italian Prima may be best known for his novelty songs ("Angelina," "Buona Sera") and as the voice of orangutan King Louie in 1967's "The Jungle Book," but he had a wide-ranging sense of musicality. "This guy was like Madonna," raves Broder. "He constantly reinvented himself. He encompasses all of Americana from jazz to vaudeville."

Prima, at 39, was on a career downswing when he added Keely Smith, a 16-year-old Virginian of Irish and Native American descent, to his act. They married a few years later. But the hit duo led a double life: Onstage, the Sicilian wooed the Cherokee to no avail; offstage, it was Smith who tried to keep the relationship together despite Prima's compulsive philandering.

Long after the two split, Prima was diagnosed with a brain tumor and slipped into a coma. For two years, his eyes were open -- doctors believe he could see and hear everything around him -- but was imprisoned in his body, an unthinkable fate for someone as ferociously kinetic as Prima. "After two years, he closed his eyes," Aldridge says. "He lived for another year, then slipped away. That was the kernel of the original idea: What allowed him to let go and die? What was going through his mind in that last moment?"

"Louis & Keely" imagines Prima's consciousness in those final seconds -- his life, lived primarily onstage, flashes before him in a series of quick cuts.

When Sacred Fools member Smith pitched her show to the company, they jumped at it, says Pdraic Duffy, who just completed his fourth season as an artistic director. "The story was economical, very clean, and a great way to showcase the music. We just had to figure out a way to raise the money. Musicals are very expensive."

"Louis & Keely" was set to run in November 2007. But just before rehearsals began, the team realized they didn't have sufficient funds to pay the band. "We did everything we could," says Smith. "But things just collapsed."

She went home to Louisiana, but kept rewriting. Her parents recognized the intensity of her dedication to the project and kicked in some cash. Sacred Fools passed a hat and raised enough money to buy her a plane ticket back to L.A. She slept on friends' couches. And kept rewriting. "We wrote a new proposal," she says, "and Sacred Fools still hadn't filled their last season slot."

By spring 2008, the script changed radically. "There were eight drafts," remembers Aldridge. "The first seven were expansive, with long monologues. Jake wasn't satisfied with the story structure. So Vanessa handed over what she had -- and he ripped it right down to the bones. Whereas before the music was on its own track, now it served to move the story along."

Three's the crowd

BRODER, whose credits include playing Amadeus opposite David Suchet on Broadway, and a stint in the Reduced Shakespeare Company, calls the show's rapid-fire aesthetic "constructivist. We cut out the fat." The story, he says, is "a lover's triangle where the third party is the audience."

Aldridge concurs. "Each song is a scene with its own conflict. Take 'Tenderly': It comes after Louis has found Keely dozing between shows with one of the musicians. It could be innocent, but Louis is paranoid. So when they sing, he attempts to control her during the song. She resists. She even mimics his style, taking some of his territory. His reaction? No sharing. It looks like a duet, but it's really a power struggle."

When they finally got to rehearse, the team threw themselves pell-mell into performance. They could only afford the musicians twice a week, and went into previews after a mere 10 rehearsals. Broder recalls sitting on his bathroom floor in the middle of the night, newborn in one hand and script in the other: "It was the only free time I had, between 3 and 6 in the morning."

The sleeplessness paid off. Duffy remembers watching a dress rehearsal and looking over at a fellow company member. "I said, 'I think this might be really great.' "

For Smith, "it wasn't until we started performing that I knew how much she loved him. My divorce is in there. I understand Keely's sense of loss. What she and Louis could have had is heartbreaking." After his relationship with Smith ended, Prima married another young singer, a fan who'd carried his photo in her purse. Aldridge shakes his head. "Everyone loves Louis. But he's the ungettable get."

"Louis & Keely" is Sacred Fools' bestselling show ever; inevitably, outside interest has been expressed. "We're in an active search for the next venue," says Aldridge.

And still rewriting. "We put in new stuff every night," says Broder. "Eventually I'd like to do what Louis did -- call the song in the moment. He wouldn't give his musicians a set list. He didn't tell the crew what the lighting cues would be. Louis just said, 'Follow me.' We're trying to re-create that energy in this show. To have a different set each performance? That's the ideal. But we have to earn that."