

Louis & Keely: Live at the Sahara

By Steven Leigh Morris

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I haven't seen this musical study of '50s lounge-act crooners Louis Prima and Keely Smith since its transcendent premiere at Sacred Fools Theatre last year, and oh, is it different. Documentary- and Oscar-nominated filmmaker Taylor Hackford has been busy misguiding writer-performers Jake Broder and Vanessa Claire Smith's musical. Taylor took over from director Jeremy Aldridge, who brought it to life in East Hollywood. Smith and Broder have drafted an entirely new book, added onstage characters — including Frank Sinatra (Nick Cagle), who, along with Broder and Smith, croons a ditty. (As though Cagle can compete with Sinatra's voice, so embedded is it into the pop culture.) They've also added Prima's mother (Erin Matthews) and other people who populated the pair's lives. The result is just a little heartbreaking: The essence of what made it so rare at Sacred Fools has been revamped and muddled into a comparatively generic bio musical, like *Stormy Weather* (about Lena Horne) or *Ella* (about Ella Fitzgerald). It used to be so much more, because it was so much less. What was a kind of musical poem is now an explanation. What was mysterious is now explicit, not only in the play but in slide projections. What made this musical so rare was the simplicity of its premise: Prima, a lounge-act singer whose act is dying, brings in a 16-year-old, Smith, to save his act. She falls for him; he tortures her by rebuffing her romantically and exploiting her offstage passions onstage. After they eventually marry, her talent overshadows his, and the offstage jealousy and hostility energize the stage act. Prima's yearning for fame leaves him exiled and in a coma, where the play begins and ends. This entire story was channeled through the two characters and the onstage band. Every song, from "Basin Street Blues" to "I've Got You Under My Skin," was a manifestation of either Prima's quest for immortality or the jealousies occurring in their partnership. The music met the textbook definition of how songs are supposed to serve a musical, to express what can't be said in life. But if Frank Sinatra grabs the stage to croon a song that comments on their marriage, or Prima's mother stands ironing

stage left, that rarefied bubble is shattered. There was one riveting scene in which young Keely Smith approached one of the musicians for comfort — sliding precariously down the slope of betrayal. That scene, an illustration of how a story could be told within the strict confines of a tightly constructed world, is gone, but so is that world. Hackford clearly never understood or appreciated the pristine theatricality of what Broder, Smith and Aldridge had carved. The play's core and tone have been diminished by the cinematic expanse of a documentary, rife with psychological theories and the gratuitous appearance of (and scenes with) other characters. Add to that a tonal shift: The musical's original heart of darkness has been sprayed over by a larger proportion of upbeat numbers replacing some of the reflective ballads. Gone are "Tenderly/Can't help Lovin' Dat Man of Mine," "Come Rain or Come Shine," and "I've Got You Under My Skin." The good news is the terrific musicianship, the musical direction originally by Dennis Kaye and now shared by Broder and Paul Litteral, remain as sharp as ever, as are the title performances. Broder's lunatic edge and Bobby Darin singing style has huge appeal, while Vanessa Claire Smith has grown ever more comfortable in the guise and vocal stylings of Keely Smith. It was the music that originally sold this show, and it should continue to do so. With luck, perhaps Broder and Smith haven't thrown out their original script. Geffen Playhouse, 10886 Le Conte Ave., Westwood; Tues.-Thurs., 8 p.m.; Fri., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., 3:30 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 2:30 & 7:30 p.m.; through April 26. (310) 208-54545.

Tuesdays-Thursdays, 8 p.m.; Fridays, 7:30 p.m.; Saturdays, 3:30 & 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2:30 & 7:30 p.m. Starts: March 19. Continues through Aug. 30, 2009