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By: Steven Stanley



By the time Louis Prima met 16-year-old Keely Smith in the late 1940s, the 37-year-old Italian-American entertainer's career had already undergone several transformations. In his teens and 20s, Prima had played trumpet in jazz combos and bands. In 1940, he formed his own Big Band, singing most of the vocals himself. By the time the 1950s rolled around, the Glenn Miller/Benny Goodman sound was passé, and "Louis Prima and Keely Smith" began their successful Las Vegas career, performing multiple shows from midnight until dawn.

New Orleans born Louis was the wild and boisterous one, while poker-faced Keely deadpanned her way through the act, singing the vocals in her rich, smoky voice. The duo, who were married for eight years, won the very first Grammy Award for Best Performance by a Vocal Group or Chorus for "That Ol' Black Magic."

In 1975, Prima was operated on for a brain tumor and slipped into a coma in which he remained for three years, until his death.

The monster hit *Louis And Keely Live At The Sahara* (its recent World Premiere run at Sacred Fools sold out performance after performance and recently scored four Ovation Award nominations) begins with a comatose Prima lying in a hospital bed center stage. When Louis's pulse begins racing, a bedside nurse tells the attending physician that the same phenomenon has been occurring every night ... at midnight. Suddenly, the fingers on Louis' left hand begin to snap, a drum begins beating along with the finger snaps, musicians take their places at the upstage bandstand, and before you know it, the hospital bed is gone and Louis Prima is back in action again.

"I'm Louis, from N'Orleans," he tells God in one of his onstage monologs. "No, the other one." And Louis has just one request, for a new woman to be part of his band, and of his life. "You keep playin' pretty like your momma told you, and I'll send you a 'her,'" God responds, and before you know it, teenage Dorothy Keely has arrived to answer his prayer, still in her red swimsuit from the beach at Virginia Beach.

The raven-haired songstress wins Louis over with her rendition of "Embraceable You," and before long is rechristened Keely Smith. "She was the sound that was going to save the band," Louis announces to us with pride, though he informs the headstrong teen, "This is my show, and you do what I tell you to do." Louis and Keely's life together was obviously going to be quite a roller coaster ride.

*Louis And Keely Live At The Sahara* moves backwards and forwards in time, as Louis drifts in and out of his memories, often addressing the audience directly, as when tenor sax player Sam joins the band. "This is a spicy gumbo!" exclaims Louis of the now complete act. "Finally we found it."

*Louis And Keely Live At The Sahara* makes the audience flie on the wall to Louis and Keely's on and offstage relationship. At one point, Keely tells the womanizing Louis, "How come you never look at me in real life like you look at me on stage?" Later, when Louis pops the "Will you marry me?" question in the middle of the act, head-over-heels Keely wastes hardly a second in telling him a big "Yes!" Soon, the papers are calling Keely a "new overnight sensation," and as her own popularity begins to overshadow Louis', cracks appear in their relationship. But when Louis tries to lay down the law ("I make the jokes. You play it cool. You know whose show it is.), Keely replies dryly, "Well, Downbeat says it's mine."

Still, when the band wonders aloud what Keely can possibly see in Louis, she informs them that she's "never known anyone so in need of love," leading to a torchy "I'm gonna love you like nobody's loved you, Come Rain Or Come Shine." Like many a moment in *Louis And Keely Live At The Sahara*, there is a musical number in their act to match their real life drama.

Performing a dozen-and-a-half of Louis and Keely's many hits, co-writers Jake Broder and Vanessa Claire Smith disappear into the skins of the legendary duo. "Them There Eyes," "That Old Black Magic," "I've Got You Under My Skin," and "Just A Gigolo" are just a handful of the songs that make Louis And Keely Live At The Sahara the swingin'est show in town, 90 minutes of music, with plenty of backstage drama to boot.

Broder gets the biggest workout, the London-trained Broadway veteran's performance a whirlwind of manic energy. Smith gets the more low-key role, but Keely's deadpan stage persona masked a fiery (and feisty) gal who could give as good as she got. Both Broder and Smith are sensational singers, and trained actors who fully embody the celebrated pair. (Both have been nominated for the Ovation in the lead actor/actress categories, and the show itself has been nominated for best intimate theater musical.)

Ovation-nominated director Jeremy Aldridge gets quite a change of pace here from the straight plays which make up his bio, but the SUNY grad is more than up to the task, keeping the drama real and the music swinging, with the help of ace musical director/saxophonist Dennis Kaye and the show's Vegas ready band. Kaye, Colin Kupka, Brian Wallis, Jeff Markgraf, Richard Levinson, Michael L. Solomon, "Hollywood" Paul Litteral, and Terry Tocantins (and Bill Wright and Nate Light performing at selected shows) are all first-class musicians who seem to be enjoying the onstage acting roles the show affords. Tall, baby-faced Kupka is particularly engaging as Sam, the object of Louis' jealousy.

Press releases tout the Matrix Theatre's larger, more central location and the spiffed-up production values. A mostly new design team has based their work on that of the original designers, all of them doing impeccable jobs. J. Kent Inasy's lighting is based on Heatherlynn Gonzalez's original design. Set design consultant Stephanie Kerley Schwartz has based her work on Dave Knutson's original set. The original costume and makeup design by Kat Bardot has been supplemented with additional costume designs by Ashley Hasenyager and Garth Dunbar. Jaime Rebedo designed the sound for both the Sacred Fools original and the current production at the Matrix.

Of all the shows I missed over StageSceneLA's first year, Louis And Keely Live At The Sahara was the one I most regretted not seeing, the one people kept telling me, "You must see this show." Somehow, I never managed to schedule a review. Fortunately, the show's rebirth has allowed me a second chance, and yes, indeed, I do know now what all the shouting has been about.

Louis And Keely Live At The Sahara would appear to be only on the first leg of its life. Already referred to as an "international phenomenon," the show is apparently on its way to productions around the globe. Now is most definitely the time to catch Louis And Keely, before they fly their L.A. coop for other lands. If, like me, you

missed it the first time around, follow my example and catch it now. You'll be sorry if you don't.

Matrix Theatre, 7657 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles. Through December 21. October show times: Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8:00. Sundays at 3:00 and 7:00. November show times: Thursdays and Fridays at 8:00, Saturdays at 3:00 and 8:00, Sundays at 3:00. Reservations: (800) 838-3006. [www.louiskeelyshow.com](http://www.louiskeelyshow.com)

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Photos: Haven Hartman