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Review: "My Sinatra"

by Cary Hoffman

By Drew Kopf

"My Sinatra" is an entertaining evening of songs sung in total or in snippets but taken as "whole cloth" from the Frank Sinatra Song Book but sung by Cary Hoffman, who joyously recounts his own autobiographical story centering mostly on how absolutely "captivated" the then young Mr. Hoffman had been with one of the coolest dudes who ever lived; the Chairman of the Board, Ol' Blue Eyes, Frank Sinatra.

Almost anyone who was in the audience to watch and listen to the Frank Sinatra live at the Paramount or anyone who grew up as the child of parents who were in Sinatra's audiences, would be able to sing along as Cary Hoffman moves seamlessly from one old standard to another, giving credit along the way to Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin and a slew of grand master song writers who provided Sinatra with tunes on which he would put his uniquely creative stamp and for which he would be tremendously grateful throughout his life.

Mr. Hoffman, who also wrote this one-man-show for himself, made certain to weave in salient points about Mr. Sinatra's own very interesting and

some-what checkered career that adds just the right spice and at just the right moment time-after-time throughout the show. We learn of the pivotal performance in which Sinatra horribly discovered that he had what might have been a career ending condition. We get to meet Sinatra, as Hoffman himself did, and marvel at just how cool one of the coolest cats who ever walked the earth actually handled himself when meeting a fledgling singer looking for a break.

We laugh when we learn just how obsessed the Sinatra-obsessed Mr. Hoffman really was. We watch him pressing his ear to his radio and phonograph (not record player and certainly not stereo or HI-Fi as yet) to where he would become reclusive, staying in his room, when all his buddies were out playing sports and chasing girls. He did everything he could to make himself sing like and move like and act like his own personal super hero; Sinatra. Example-after-example of Mr. Hoffman's unceasing efforts to master the master's voice; to mimic Sinatra's style and try to be as cool as he could possibly be keeps his audience chuckling, giggling and laughing out loud in a headlong race to intermission, which comes as Mr. Hoffman demonstrates his

best Sinatra mimicry, singing a fabulous song in a melodically pleasing way and, whether like Sinatra or not, by that time we have gotten to know Cary Hoffman and to appreciate his sincere and passionate quest. But, in truth, by that time, it really doesn't matter because Mr. Hoffman's music is real and pleasing in and of itself, which enables him to exit in the way of a matador in a bullfight after spinning his cape and bringing the bull literally to its knees, and leaving us, his audience, which has become his cheering squad, clapping like heck and wanting more.

Intermission seemed to be over in an instant, largely because of a twenty-something couple who sat next to us and who explained how much of a Frank Sinatra buff the guy in that couple is and how much he loves seeing almost anything that deals with Sinatra. They were an exciting pair immersed in today's world but thoroughly enthralled with whatever it was that made Sinatra so special even if he was a product of what is surely to them yesterday.

The music began the second act in a great rush. Alex Nelson, the Musical Director has done a terrific job in helping make the elements of the show move nicely from prerecorded tracks from Sinatra recordings to interludes where a solo piano, perhaps played by Mr. Nelson as well, but that is not clarified by the show's program, gets us from Point A to Point B. We are rarely left without some kind of musical assistance to keep the mood and motion moving forward.

It is always made clear from the beginning of "My Sinatra" to the end that Mr. Hoffman is no Frank Sinatra and is not trying to be. After all, no one other than Frank Sinatra could be Frank Sinatra. But, what is also clear is how much Mr. Hoffman gets out of his almost total immersion in style and the music of his idol. What drove Mr. Hoffman to this passion is alluded to at one point when he confesses that he was certain that being cool in the way of Sinatra would be a sure way to get girls to like him. Who could blame a guy for that kind of thinking? It makes sense. Girls were crazy about Sinatra until the day he died and even beyond.

If you are thinking of coming to see "My Sinatra" to see Frank Sinatra, then don't come, because he's not there. If you come to "My Sinatra" to hear Frank Sinatra, then forget that too, because he is not there. As a matter of fact, the

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closest you will come to hearing anything that was part of the true Sinatra sound is a recording of a horn solo played by one of Mr. Hoffman's maternal uncles, who was in the Sinatra back up band and who must have, himself, been some special and talented musician.

Then, you might ask, "Why come?" I'll tell you. It is because when each of us was just knee high to a grasshopper, we were stricken by someone; a ball player, an artist, a movie star, a relative a teacher, someone, who became for us a model of what we thought being a grown up was all about or at least ought to be. I remember one of my brothers, who modeled his entire at-bat in baseball by the way "the Duke" conducted himself when he was at bat during a game. My brother knew every move the Duke made. He emulated his swing and even got similar results during games slamming homeruns and trotting around the bases a la the Duke.

Mr. Hoffman gives us a chance to see ourselves in a rare kind of perspective; one that says, "Hey. This is what it would be like if you had stayed stuck in that time of your life when emulating someone else was more important to you than being you." We laugh about that prospect and, at certain moments, we may wax nostalgic as we remember those feeling of needing or wanting something that we thought might be missing in ourselves and how we tried to paste it on by doing things their way instead of our own way. (Hey? I bet there's a song there).

"My Sinatra" by Cary Hoffman is a delightful evening of music and memories. But, it is not just about Frank Sinatra and it is not even just about Mr. Hoffman, who is kind enough and brave enough to share his inner thoughts and feelings about that very special part of his life with us. It is about each of us who comes to the show, who sits back and relaxes to the music, which is just terrific, and who listens to the narratives of two men's lives, Mr. Hoffman's of course and, that of the late Mr. Sinatra, and who allows ones self to peer back into his or her own life and recall the point where we felt strong enough to pull away from the gantry, as it was, of that person whom we had so very much admired and, perhaps, about whom we modeled ourselves, and allowed ourselves lift off, clear the tower and to fly through life on our own power.

"My Sinatra" is at the Midtown Theater, 163 West 46th Street, just steps away from Broadway. (212)352-3101.

Drew Kopf is an artist, who is painting the Sedrahs of the Torah one weekly Parsha at a time (www.echelonartgallery.com), an entrepreneur and an occasional contributor to The Jewish Post of NY.