

Russell's girls are outrageous

Concert review by Michaleen Marte-Elabdi

Girls, Girls, Girls ... Count 'em! Can you? I simply can't! Craig Russell is just too much honey.

This man came to SUB Theatre and astounded the audience with his bevy of beautiful girls. Old sweethearts like Carol Channing, new stars like the divine Ms. M. (Bette Midler), unforgettable personalities like Sophy Tucker and legendary survivors like Marlene Dietrich. These ladies did not surround Russell on the stage. Rather, with ingenious skill and imagination, he became each one of them.

Russell was assisted only by a small group of musicians from the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra. The musicians were led by his own director Paul Hossert (who was involved with the film score for *Outrageous*). The marvelous wigs and costumes were

made and fitted, I might add, by Russell's costume specialist.

At the show none of us received a program. The reason for this became clear as the show progressed. Russell wanted the audience to remain in complete suspense as to what lady would appear next. And it was effective. Right from the first strains of Aretha Franklin's theme song, Russell showed us what it was like to feel like a "um, natural person."

Bubbly, precocious Carol Channing greeted us first with "Hello Dolly." Included in the song was a part for good old Edmonton. She exchanged verses with the great Satchmo — Louis Armstrong, who seemed strangely at home in the old girl's throat.

From this began an extraordinary excursion through the hearts and lives of Russell's Ladies. The number of personalities was endless, and the highlights were truly memorable. There was the halted, soft, accented voice of Marlene Dietrich who moved like a mechanical doll and reminisced about the war years.

There was voluptuous Mae West singing a raunchy version of "Franky and Johnny." There was the charming but cutting Betty Davis worrying about how she would be remembered against the competition of Joan Crawford. Flippant Tallulah Bankhead cracked cocktail jokes. The "sleaze with ease," "trash with flash" Bette Midler strutted the stage. There was Ella with Satchmo again. Billy Holiday sang under a hazy blue light. Dramatic Judy Garland sang "Over the Rainbow Once Again." Janis Joplin screamed "Piece of My Heart" one last time.

My favorite of the evening was the unforgettable Peggy Lee. Russell reproduced her warm, tremulous voice and made her float with "Fever." Lee kept up a dubious discussion between songs and ended with a candid and hilarious rendition of "Is That All There Is?"

Russell's show was pure non-stop entertainment. Even between costume changes he sang and talked to the audience. It was evident that Russell had attracted a following of people who were familiar with his many clever and lewd lines, and who waited in great anticipation for their favorite lady to appear.

And there were surprises. The biggest was Anita Bryant who attempted to get the crowd to sing the hymn "Glory Halleluah" with her. After she failed to get "support" she pleaded that she didn't hate "queers," because she confessed, who else would do her hair.

Russell was brought back three times for an encore. At first he was Liza Minelli, then Shirley Bassey and lastly he was himself, singing the theme song from "Outrageous," the movie that brought him his first fame. After such a great movie and a fantastic theatre performance, Russell has proved that "feeling so gay" and being Canadian are not drawbacks for an extraordinary talent.



photo Brad Keith

Hey big engineer, is that a calculator in your pocket or...



The divine Ms. M bares more than her soul as she slides her sleazy way across the stage.



photo Rick Lawrence

Judy Garland may be gone, but she's not over the rainbow.



photo Rick Lawrence

Peggy Lee asks if that's all there is.



photo Rick Lawrence

Has Carol Channing got something caught in her throat?

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