

Craig

by Cheryl Downton

Not even the Academy Awards presentations could rival the glitter of the stars upon the stage for this one single evening. Memory can not recall a time when Judy Garland shared the stage with Janis Joplin, or Bette Davis the spotlight with Bette Midler, or Marlene Deitrich the microphone with Peggy Lee. Yet, as inconceivable as it may seem, these, along with two score more, performed in concert on a solitary stage. Craig Russell was in Halifax, and with him he brought more life and character to the dead and dying than their memories permit.

Russell's portrayal of Garland was painfully realistic: wrapped in her cocoon of little girl naivete, she searches still

for that elusive strength to be found "Somewhere Over the Rainbow". In striking contrast, Lisa Minelli assumes a toughened frailty and tosses her bouquet into the darkened theatre. Barbra Striesand struts to the theme from "A Star is Born", while Carol Channing gushes forth from feathered depths to sing a medley of her greatest hit. Mae West sheds feathers and winks, and Sophie Tucker belts out the blues.

Russell's repertoire includes everyone from Anita Bryant and Katherine Hepburn, to Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald. Costumes and props range from a black slip and spike heels, to floor-length feather capes and glasses acquired from the audience. Add a wig or two, panty hose, and a versatile sense of fashion, and the sum is the very popular recreation of the glitter and shine of some very worldly specimens.

Some of Russell's best

impersonations are achieved using an enviable combination of song and vocal manipulation: Billie Holiday crooning a soft and stirring ballad; Louis and Ella hamming it up for a duelling duet; Peggy Lee's stilted excitement; Hepburn's throaty, neck-swathed soliloquy; Bette Davis' black leather encased rhetoric. The end product is so real, it's hard to hang on to reality.

Even the purely physical energy drain must exact its toll: the up and down hysterical thrusts of Joplin, and the intricate squatting and posing manoeuvres of Midler. Throughout the entire show, there was no breaks, no lulls. Russell maintained an on-going back and forth dialogue while shedding one soul for another. Nearing the end of his gruelling two hour performance, Russell chose to sing a song from the sleeper movie hit *Outrageous*, which offers the realization that "It Ain't Easy".



Craig Russel relaxes offstage.



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