

END OF THE RAINBOW: REVIEW

By Jo Hodgson for Theatreview: 18 Feb 2023

A potent, frenetic, heart-wrenching and often humorous gift

Say the name Judy Garland and the majority of us will see a young Kansas lass and her little dog singing about her dreams beyond the rainbow, or maybe a fresh-faced Esther Smith riding on that clanging trolley.

I have to confess that aside from her journey over the rainbow, being a Hollywood film star, mother to Liza Minnelli and a tormented figure later in life, I don't know very much about Judy Garland.

Peter Quilter's award-winning musical play, *End of the Rainbow*, takes us on Garland's tumultuous journey – with her fiancé, Mickey Deans, and pianist, Anthony – of her comeback 'Talk of the Town' tour in London before the end of her life in 1969.

Jeff Kingsford-Brown adroitly directs this potent, frenetic and often humorous script, all the while illuminating the struggle of a mis-understood star addled by a history of substance abuse and manipulation by those around her.

The majority of the action takes place on a beautifully designed set (Ian Harman) of a suite at the Ritz, interspersed with electrifying performances from the concert tour. The lighting design (Jeff Hewitt/Riley Gibson) is gorgeously effective with a progressive rainbow colour palette of vertical light drops which highlight Judy's exquisite frocks (created by Ian Harman).

Ali Harper is quite simply phenomenal as Judy Garland. She manages to completely embody the physicality, mannerisms and vocals of this hugely complex and damaged woman.

Ali has the ability to wear characters like a second skin. I am mesmerised by her powerful, feisty and vulnerable portrayal, sometimes within the same paragraph, and then singing the house down with Garland styled inflection, tone colour and star quality.

The rapport between the three main performers is wonderful. Judy/Ali is supported by the passionate, yet controlling Mickey (Glenn Horsfall) and the loyal, dry humoured Brit pianist, Anthony (Tom McLeod) with Kevin Orlando adding in a few cameo roles.

They all deliver this story with pathos and the necessary truth to allow us to enter into the world, but while we laugh, we also cry at the desperateness of it all.

Judy Garland had such a unique voice and the music is an essential part of this play's storytelling, whether a full rendition of a song, or just a snippet.

Musical director Tom McLeod's character Anthony leads the exceptional band and is equally at home tinkling solo on the ivories or giving an energetic downbeat to swing them all into the mix. The sound is rich and full and they, with Ali, soar their way through songs like, *I can't give you anything but love, When you're Smiling, Come Rain or Come Shine*. These are contrasted with the heart-wrenching *The Man that got away* and the magical *Over the Rainbow*.

What a gift to learn a little more about this extraordinary artist, a woman who in spite of being revered and loved by adoring fans ultimately left this world like the words in this final song:

*And I'll face the unknown, I'll build a world of my own
No one knows better than I myself
I'm by myself alone, I'll go, I'll go by myself alone.*

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By Talia Carlisle for Theatreview: 19 Feb 2023

Judy's return something to talk about

Pour the champagne because Judy Garland has come to town.

Peter Quilter's smash hit show *End of the Rainbow* opened to loud belly laughs, big smiles and plenty of cheers at the Wellington Opera House this weekend.

While the audience and stars were dressed to impress, the show documented the beloved The Wizard of Oz Star Judy Garland's less than sparkling turbulence through fame and addiction – all wrapped in a bow of beautiful costumes and spine-tingling songs by a masterful band.

This includes the grandest of grand pianos – with plenty of stage presence given its size – an unfaltering and at times comedic character itself throughout the show's twists and tantrums.

Ali Harper is sensational in her transformation into the sparkling yet troubled songbird Judy. Ali spans Judy's repertoire of songs and emotions easily, from beautiful "Blue Skies" to our recognizable highlight of the show – "Over the Rainbow", which starts with a memorable cello solo by Nathan Parker, and ends with no dry eye in the house.

Ali's portrayal of Judy is monumentally moving from start to finish. This is emanated through her every sound, twitch, and hair touse, every word, every kiss, and reaches into every heart in every seat of the Opera House.

Best described by a fellow audience member – Ali "disappears" and in her place Judy is alive before our star-struck eyes. Every joke, every melody and all of her sequined glory absorb the audience's delight in a vortex of beautiful chaos, that we only have until Sunday to see.

"I can still make you laugh," Judy says – and she does – letting her quick wit and intelligent comedic references shine throughout the show. No matter her escalating money troubles or romantic spats, she can see life for what it is but chooses to find cause for celebration.

She doesn't shy away from any opportunity to woo the press or crowd, or a lover – stealing a kiss and even a man's pants barely 10 seconds into the show.

Ian Harman has to be thanked for the effortlessly chic and sequined costumes that transform Judy into the recognizable and sparkling sensation we know and love. Judy's colorful character is in stark contrast with the minimal and beautiful set, also designed by Ian.

Ian puts The Ritz into Judy's glossy hotel room, which magically transforms into the flashy hotel stage for her London performances every night with the most magical of glittering lighting designed by Jeff Hewitt.

Small details give hints as to Judy's current and past career state, such as the tiniest grand chandelier, and her suitcase packed with towels "to keep up appearances". Judy's sweet and talented piano accompanist, music director and "best friend" Anthony is played by Tom McLeod with charm, humour and unending patience. He sees Judy's heart, her goodness, her talent and passion and helps us all in the audience to see it too – all while tickling the keys and keeping the band in line as the show's multi-talented musical director.

Glenn Horfall plays Judy's long suffering – or long benefitting – fiancé Mickey Deans, with all of the charisma, charm and gaiety that Judy is seeking in a companion. Someone to make light of the dark and drug-filled world she has managed to keep hidden behind closed doors, until now.

"I am the luckiest girl alive", Judy exclaims, just weeks before her untimely death, despite her unease at being so far from home in London, her difficulties sleeping since being force-fed pills as a child actor, and resorting to name calling, swearing and begging for alcohol to feel temporarily "herself".

Yet, her optimism shines through in the darkest of times – celebrating her London arrival with tap-water instead of champagne and always a trick up her sequined sleeve. Even when Judy has no energy left to give, she will find herself at her hotel room balcony, to ensure the town, or the tiresome Porter (and Assistant Stage Manager, played by Kevin Orlando) have something to talk about.

As Judy sings her heart and her soul out into the rafters, it's hard not to believe that we too will find better days ahead, somewhere over the rainbow.

As her final songs steal our hearts, again, and the haze of smoke thins, I wonder if the Judy we knew was just that – all smoke and mirrors.

All I know, is that the real Judy is here, in Wellington, and to miss it would be the greatest tragedy of all.

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By Tania Piejus for Wellington Regional News: 18 Feb 2023

The decline of Judy Garland (Ali Harper) in the months leading up to her death from an overdose in 1969 forms the basis of this tragic, yet darkly funny, play with music. Judy is staying at The Ritz along with her new, much younger fiancé Mickey Deans (Glen Horsfall) and besotted friend and pianist Anthony (Tom McLeod, who doubles as musical director), preparing for a five-week run of shows. She hopes her act will maintain her high profile, but she struggles with addictions to booze and pills and her complex and strained relationships with the two men.

Having witnessed Harper's gift for vocal mimicry before, I had no doubt that she could carry off a convincing portrayal of Judy Garland in song, which she does magnificently. However, it is her acting chops that come to the fore in *End of the Rainbow*. She's constantly on the move, a twitchy bag of drug-deprived nerves, with a sharp wit and a yen for manipulation. The men don't stand a chance as she bullies and cajoles them into indulging her needs, by turns the acid-tongued adult and the petulant teenager she was when the Hollywood studio machine started plying her with drugs. This is clearly a passion project for Harper, one which she fully embraces with the skill and energy of a seasoned performer.

As her foils, Horsfall and McLeod support Harper superbly and Kevin Orlando steals the show with his brief appearances as a porter and stage manager. McLeod's musical direction and piano playing are also excellent, as is the six-piece band that is perfectly balanced against Harper's powerful vocals.

The production design (Ian Harman) is smart and unfussy with glittery costumes that belie Judy's less-than-sparkly mental state and a simple but slick set. Jeff Hewitt's lighting design is also highly effective, especially during the final number.

Don't miss Ali Harper's stellar performance of a falling star. This is one rainbow you'll never want to end.