

JUDYS ENCORE: REVIEW

By Kineta Knight for Chris Lynch Media: 10 May 2025

She's a better Judy Garland than Judy Garland

Have you ever been to a show where you were borderline convinced you were literally watching the person a performer was portraying? That happened in Ali Harper's *Judy's Encore*.

I was utterly lost in Judy Garland's world, felt transported to another time, when Garland's life and career spanned some of the most tumultuous and transformative decades of the 20th Century.

Born in 1922, Garland came of age during the Great Depression, a time of deep economic hardship. By the late 1930s, she was already a household name, catapulted to fame by *The Wizard of Oz* – a film that offered escapism during an era of uncertainty.

Harper's depiction of Garland is superb. As the woman sitting next to me said at half time, "She's a better Judy Garland than Judy Garland." And I couldn't agree more.

Harper has written a piece of art. But it wouldn't be complete without the undeniable talent of musical director and arranger Tom Rainey. The 1940s saw Garland at the height of her stardom, performing in lavish MGM musicals that defined the Golden Age of Hollywood. However, behind the glamorous facade was a highly controlled studio system that often treated young stars like commodities. Garland, like many others, was subjected to intense scrutiny, overwork, and a reliance on prescription drugs – all of which would haunt her throughout her life.

And it's all of this that comes out in this piece.

It's more than Harper singing a set list of Garland songs. It's all about the narrative. It's the words between the songs that ring out louder than what she's actually singing.

It's the vulnerability, sincerity. It's the breaking down of the fourth wall to share her life with her audience.

Garland was only 47 when she passed from an accidental drug overdose. Reflect on that. She made an incredible impact on so many, including five husbands and an unforgettable entertainment career, at such a young age. Harper's script called for both musicality and bringing Garland's personal life to the fore, weaving tales of woe and entertaining stories between each track.

But it's the music that's the driving force behind the success of this show. Tom Rainey and Ali Harper must never stop working together. What they produce is absolute magic.

Harper's characterisation of Garland is beyond perfect. Harper scoops you up into this fantastical world, borderline make believe, of Garland's life. But there's not a single piece of fiction in this story. Sadly, Garland's reality. Harper is one of Christchurch's greatest gifts. How did we get so lucky? Her performance ideas unstoppable, her vocal range, wit and charm limitless.

She really has crafted herself a beautiful niche of emulating incredible beings.

"She's a better Judy Garland than Judy Garland." As I write this review, this comment is ringing throughout my mind. Because it's true. Harper's embodiment of Garland is superb. Her idiosyncrasies, mannerisms, vulnerability. It's like being transported to another time.

Garland's personal life was marked by struggle: mental health battles, financial instability, and tumultuous relationships. Despite this, she remained a deeply beloved figure, known for her extraordinary voice, emotional depth, and sheer magnetism.

All of this is woven into *Judy's Encore*.

I could stop this review here, but I do have more to say. The spotlight was not only on Harper last night, but on her band. Each member had their chance to embrace the music and fly, and they did. Other than the powerhouse of talent that is Tom Rainey, I was most impressed with his seriously talented son Jimmy Rainey who effortlessly switched between alto and tenor saxophone, clarinet and flute. That was a showcase all in itself.

And Richard Pickard on double bass had his spotlight moment in the opening of Act Two – *Fly Me To The Moon*. Christchurch is so lucky to attain and keep such superb musicians.

I would like to take the time to list all the brilliant moments in Harper's show, but it really is a production you must see for yourself to appreciate. Harper is an unbeatable talent with a seemingly unlimited vocal range, and I'm here for it, and whatever superb idea she has next.

Their range of songs takes in all the favourites, among them memorable renderings of 'I Feel a Song Coming On', 'I've Got Rhythm', 'The Man That Got Away' and 'When You're Smiling'. Throughout, impeccable musical direction and arrangement are an important part of the whole. Led by Tom Rainey on the piano, Doug Brush (drums), Richie Pickard (double bass) and Jimmy Rainey (horns) – the band – provide ongoing pleasure.

JUDYS ENCORE: see www.aliharper.com for details

JUDYS ENCORE: REVIEW

By Lindsay Clark for Theatreview: 10 May 2025

A thoroughly satisfying theatre experience

The career and extraordinary talent of Judy Garland offers wonderful material and a natural fit for the vibrant stage personality and thrilling voice of Ali Harper, paired with assured musical support from Tom Rainey and his band. The imagined context explored in this showcase of well-loved musical numbers is Judy's hopeful return to showbiz some years after an ignominious exit, where a drug-fueled personal life led to her disgrace as a performer. Thus, exposition is neatly handled, with the generous choice of songs arranged to reflect the familiar story coherently.

There is, however, more to the production than an evening of favourites. Judy's personal insecurities as she woos us, her longed-for audience, are established with careful craft. The work is sympathetic, without the dilution of sentiment and, as we have seen in her many solo shows, Ali Harper is totally secure dealing smoothly with the challenges of both music and character. Time and again the wide-eyed vulnerability of the performing Judy is swept up and away as she is taken over by the creative joy of music making, facing, nevertheless, the need for reassurance from her audience. Love, in fact.

Ultimately though, it is the exuberance and musicality of the performer and the elegant sophistication of the band that will be remembered as hallmarks of the production.

Their range of songs takes in all the favourites, among them memorable renderings of '*I Feel a Song Coming On*', '*I've Got Rhythm*', '*The Man That Got Away*' and '*When You're Smiling*'. Throughout, impeccable musical direction and arrangement are an important part of the whole. Led by Tom Rainey on the piano, Doug Brush (drums), Richie Pickard (double bass) and Jimmy Rainey (horns) – the band – provide ongoing pleasure.

Infectious joy is natural territory for this performer, whose whole body sparks into life with each song. Here, the joy is balanced by the delicious poignancy of hope. By the time Judy's signature song about rainbow and bluebirds is reached, a thoroughly satisfying theatre experience has been created for us.

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