

THE SUPPER CLUB: REVIEW

By Talia Carlisle for Theatreview: 21 Jan 2024

Expect the unexpected – our superstar never disappoints

The most exclusive club in town is taking new members.

Now open at Circa, Ali Harper's *The Supper Club* has all the grandeur and cheekiness you can expect from our talented bombshell and esteemed Toi Whakaari graduate (1994).

Back in her second home at Circa, no sequins are spared in adorning the theatre into a grand hall worthy of chandeliers and soirees worth remembering. You shouldn't expect anything less of director, set and costume designer Ian Harman, whose sparkle is noticeable at every feather swish and costumed twirl.

Sequins and feathers ready, *The Supper Club* promises a showcase of songs through the last century. We're in for an adventure and my best heels are in place for the ride.

Ali knows how to heat up and cool down the enthusiastic Wellington crowd, with her soulful trills, rasps and oohs, leaving the audience in awe of her range, power and repertoire, showcased across the nearly two hour set: a 100-year musical history and countless songs and characters to whisk us through the ages.

Never one to shy away from a challenge, Ali's *Supper Club* showcase is a new style of show unlike a usual love story. Here the love is for the music and we are transported by our time-travelling host Ali for the ride.

Musical director Tom McLeod is a marvellous leader of the pack, grinning ear-to-ear while providing the vehicle for our great escape through the ages – a grand piano – with The Jazz Hot Supper Club Band: our talented musical tour guides.

This unstoppable combination of talent is a delight to behold as we hear every instrument shine and watch every musician be a star in their own right, with Olivia Campion on percussion, Scott Maynard on Double Bass and Blair Latham covering brass, woodwind and guitar – what a feat!

Ali embodies all the characters and songs enhanced by the 'super' band as I call them, from 'It's De-lovely', and 'Too Darn Hot', to some 20th century surprises and the rare dance number to keep us on our toes with additional choreography by Sandy Gray and Ian – there is nothing he can't do!

There are plenty of surprises, my biggest ones being the number of songs I don't know and the number of languages Ali makes her own, while giving us some new favourites along the way.

The costumes and set are characters taking on their own life as the jaw dropping backdrop is brought further to life by lighting designer Rich Tucker. If there was ever a time to be blinded by a disco ball, that time is now!

Joy is found in the smallest touches of props, movement, and the band's chemistry and charisma; they bounce off each other and charm us all.

As the story is in the songs and many songs are meant as a surprise, the show is unpredictable, but **we have come to expect the unexpected from Ali and our superstar never disappoints**. I wonder if the next show will take us into the future or space, as anything is possible with the unstoppable Ali Harper, Tom McLeod and the Jazz Hot 'Super' Club Band.

Copyright © in the review belongs to the reviewer

<https://www.theatreview.org.nz/production/the-supper-club/#expect-the-unexpected-our-superstar-never-disappoints>

THE SUPPER CLUB: see www.aliharper.com for details

THE SUPPER CLUB: REVIEW

By Peter Mechen for Middle C: 23 Jan 2024

Irrepressibly delightful Ali Harper – every which way at Circa Theatre’s “The Supper Club”

You have to hand it to Ali Harper, right from her first “boots and all” appearance on the floor of Circa 1 as a delightfully enthusiastic and even somewhat engagingly dishevelled “hostess-cum-organiser-cum-stage manager” firing on all cylinders to make her audience feel welcomed and at home to her “Supper Club” for a “sumptuous smorgasbord of song”. Utterly in character was her peremptory (and near-perilous!) exiting to check up on some vital last-second detail regarding the show’s introduction! – but most importantly she had us all primed to a tee for what was to follow – a “coming-to-life” of what seemed like a typically subterranean nightclub scenario, with light, movement and sound! In fact the opening saxophone notes of “Basin Street Blues” – would have instantly evoked for my generation those first, far-off New Zealand black-and-white television images of the renowned Leonard Feather’s programmes featuring some of the great musicians of jazz, which began, as I remember, every week with those same haunting upward phrases!.....

So, even before Ali Harper herself returned to the stage I was hooked, **floating on a nostalgic carpet of sounds** begun by Blair Latham’s insinuating saxophone sounds, all of which continued with the support of Tom McLeod’s piano, Scott Maynard’s double bass and Olivia Champion’s drums. Harper’s reappearance as “Nellie”, a 1920s English Rose, instantly captivated, her persona complete with idiomatic-sounding Cockney (?) accent, and a bevy of songs, which sounded totally “period” in character, despite (according to my researches when writing this review) the earliest of them “The Physician” first appearing in a 1933 Cole Porter musical “Nymph Errant”, and the latest “C’est si bon” a 1947 song by Henri Betti (a pedantic observation on my part, under the circumstances!). I was particularly captivated by, firstly, “The Physician”, having never heard it or known it before, and then the George Gershwin song “Slap that Bass” (from the 1937 film “Shall We Dance”). Harper’s performances of each one as “Nellie” I thought particularly delightful.

Either an authentic recording of 1939 British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s grimly-voiced ultimatum to the German Government regarding the latter’s invasion of Poland, or a creditable imitation of that same voice was heard amid the stage’s darkly-growing ambience leading to a new singer’s appearance, one with the name Golde, whose appearance and manner made the greatest possible contrast with the delightful “Nellie”. Harper’s wonderfully deadpan “I’m the Laziest Girl in town” (another Cole Porter song that was new to me – what a musical goldmine of an evening it had become already!) belied her character’s raunchily-delivered succeeding number “Let’s Misbehave!” (another Porter song), and included a couple of Harper’s amusing “sitting duck” audience interactions giving pleasure of a different kind (depending on whether one was a recipient or an observer!). But I thought the disturbingly militaristic treatment accorded the accompaniment to the well-known “Lili Marlene” chillingly effective amid surreal blood-orange lighting, culminating in suitably atonally-accelerated oblivion, and the maniacal ravings of (presumably) Adolf Hitler as the singer left the stage!

Our antidote to all of this was provided by Harper’s next singer, Claudette, a vivacious and no-nonsense figure entering centrestage and continuing right into

the audience, giving out cards which displayed the legend "Vive la France", before launching into an engaging, quick-waltz number which I didn't know, but which crackled with energy – "Ça sent si bon la France" (France smells so good)! After such unbridled energy we appreciated a "breather" in the form of "Les Feuilles Mortes" (Dead Leaves), a melody I didn't know I knew at first, but **was held spellbound by the singer's beautiful, becalmed concentration and breathtakingly spare accompaniment**. As for the concluding number in this bracket, Harper paid unashamed homage to the great Edith Piaf, here, with "Non, je ne regrette rien", the song's spoken introduction flowering into stirring, strongly-framed utterance and bringing an **overwhelming ovation** with which to end the first half – whew!

A comfortably-paced interval gave us time and space to process what we'd heard and to refresh for what was still to come, with Tom McLeod and the Jazz Hot Supper Club band in the driving seat for the first couple of numbers of the second half's opening bracket, "Freddie", obviously an American singer/performer. A snappy instrumental opening to Irving Berlin's 1927 song "Puttin' on the Ritz" was complemented by the entertainingly nimble singing of pianist Tom McLeod, who then delivered a similarly lithe rendition of Ben Wiseman's 1957 song (written for Elvis Presley) "A lot of Livin' to do", accompanied by a great sax solo in the latter by Blair Latham.

Ali Harper's entry as (presumably) Fred Astaire, complete with top hat, got a great reception, as did her rendition of the eponymous title song, though as a contrast to the razz-matazz opening, I would have liked some contrasting circumspection in both the vocal line and accompaniment in both Jerome Kern's 1940 song "The Last time I saw Paris" and Cole Porter's earlier (1932) song "Night and Day" – a more wistful, measured delivery of either song could have varied the mix to its and our advantage. Still, variety came with the next two numbers featured as vocal duets from singer and pianist, Tom McLeod joining Ali Harper in Richard Whiting's 1937 hit "Too Marvelous for Words", and then the throwback 1927 Dave Dreyer song "Me and My Shadow", whose introductory music I didn't at all know, until the lyrics reached those famous eponymous lines, by which time Harper and McLeod had wowed us with their snappy dance routine to boot!

Two more recent numbers concluded the "American " sequence – coincidentally I had not long ago been watching the old 1950s "Kiss Me, Kate" film and enjoying the superb Ann Miller's song-and-dance routine for Cole Porter's "Too Darn Hot", one which Harper most effectively turned into a sultry "femme fatale" number, then next "vamping" the Nancy Sinatra "These Boots were made for walkin'" hit, and excitingly upwardly-modulating the keys for each of the refrains, her sexy Peggy Lee-like-insouciance actually heightening the song's tensions! Wow!

The show's finale was a "Supper Club Comin' Out Night" with Harper as the "Ultimate Diva" and giving her own era's songs the full treatment – I thought it all worked in an "I gave it all I had" way, warm and open-hearted, wide-ranging and full-blooded **I was left with renewed appreciation of Harper's ability to convey memorable and contrasting characterisations of the kind I'd previously seen and so enjoyed. Every "episode" had its particular gem, giving me plenty to take away from the evening and ponder amid plentiful memories and nostalgic associations.** Together with her ever-responsive musicians, allied with director Ian Harman's stage and costumes expertise, Sandy Gray's choreography and Rich Tucker's "on the button" lighting, **Harper made our evening glow with warmth and scintillate with pleasure.**

THE SUPPER CLUB: see www.aliharper.com for details

THE SUPPER CLUB: REVIEW

By Madelaine Empson for Wellington Regional News: 22 Jan 2024

Imagine an old, abandoned Supper Club. The ghosts of grandeur haunt every cobwebbed corner, the hopes and dreams once nurtured within now scattered like boa feathers in the wind. But with Tom McLeod and The Jazz Hot Supper Club Band, New Zealand songstress Ali Harper is about to restore The Supper Club to its former glory, embodying the various singers whose echoes still reverberate through its storied, sequined past.

As characters like the happy-go-lucky English girly and the sharp, smouldering German superstar, Harper trills, thrills, and traverses everything from Cole Porter's *It's De-Lovely* to Édith Piaf's *Non, je ne regrette rien* to Madonna's *Material Girl*. Because anything can (and does!) happen in this fabulous production, I don't wish to spoil any further specifics or surprises... only to give you a taste of the tantalising talent within.

First up, there's Harper, whose respect and reverence for the muses she inhabits is palpable. With charm, charisma, and chops for days, she is, quite simply, sensational.

Then we have that phenomenal band, with musical director Tom McLeod on arrangements and piano, Blair Latham on saxophone, clarinet, guitar, and flute, Olivia Campion on percussion, and Scott Maynard on double bass. A tight, cohesive unit in their own right, when paired with Harper, their joy is infectious, their chemistry crackling. They bounce off each other like reflections from a disco ball.

Everything director Ian Harman touches turns to gold. As set and costume designer to boot, he's created the world where all this magic takes place. Meticulous details abound, from the crystal glasses that once would have housed the finest cognac to the way Harper's dazzling black gown catches the light.

And speaking of light, Rich Tucker's moody, glam lighting scheme brings this Supper Club to life, crafting intimate moments while highlighting the showstopping spectacle of it all in equal measure. The epitome of ambience.

The Supper Club? A delightful, delicious, de-lovely escape.

THE SUPPER CLUB: see www.aliharper.com for details

THE SUPPER CLUB: REVIEW

By Sarah Catherall for The Post: 25 Jan 2024

Prepare to be wooed and charmed at The Supper Club

Ali Harper is Golda, a German cabaret singer performing in a Parisian club in 1937.

Resplendent in a gorgeous gold frock, **the multi-talented entertainer woos and charms the Circa Theatre audience** as she sings a few songs, including Jacques Prevert's Immense and Red, backed by an impressive band: Tom McLeod and the Jazz Hot 'Supper' Club Band.

Golda (Harper) drops onto the knee of a man in the front row, and croons in his ear, singing Cole Porter's Let's Misbehave. We sit in a replica Parisian cabaret, Supper Club, which features like a character in Harper's two-hour long show.

With feathers, sparkles and furs, thanks to the talents of director, set and costume designer Ian Harman, you can imagine smoke rings blowing through the air to set the scene.

Harper dashes backstage for costume changes as she re-emerges as new characters all playing different chanteuses (songstresses) singing a showcase of jazz, blues and pop jazz songs from the last century.

The Christchurch-based jazz singer and entertainer is at her best in the show's first half as she switches between characters.

Nellie is first, under the glittering disco ball, dressed in a fur. It's 1929, and she has arrived in a second-class cabin from working-class England. She naively shares a story about being sexually assaulted, reminding us of what women had to endure back then, especially those who made a living out of performing and entertaining. Harper's voice is beautiful to listen to, and we can imagine her singing to crowds on cruise ships (which she did last year).

The exceptional band need special mention: Arranger and pianist Tom McLeod (who stars as a character in the second half), saxophonist/guitarist/clarinet player Blair Latham, drummer Olivia Champion, and double bass player Scott Maynard, making up The Jazz Hot Supper Club Band.

They bounce off each other and charm us all, accompanying Harper on songs like It's De-lovely, Non, Je ne Regrette Rien, Puttin' on the Ritz, These Boots Were Made For Walkin' and Too Darn Hot.

Next off to New York to perform at one of its cabaret clubs, her uniqueness as a performer is that she loves to go back into yesteryear, particularly when she shares the lives and music of some of our female legends from the past - one of her best shows was her 2016 A Doris Day Special.

In The Supper Club, the four singers are invented, but they are believable as characters (Freddie, the American from the 1950s was my least favourite but the audience liked her).

In the final scene, Harper performs as herself, and the highlight for me is her encore.

Singing Helen Reddy's 1971 song, I am Woman, her strong, soprano voice fills the theatre and **she is magnetic to watch.**

The only downside of The Supper Club is the timing. I can't help but think it would be better to be transported to a steamy Parisian cabaret on a wintry evening, when we're wrapped in jackets, rather than clambering to sit under the theatre air conditioning.

<https://www.thepost.co.nz/nz-news/350157271/prepared-be-woed-and-charmed-supper-club>

THE SUPPER CLUB: see www.aliharper.com for details

THE SUPPER CLUB: REVIEW

By Simon Sweetman for Off The Tracks: 23 Jan 2024

It is almost extraordinary to think back, to try to tally up the number of musical characters Ali Harper has invented, or inhabited - real and imagined; also the number of fine composers she has paid tribute to through her various shows. The Supper Club is just the latest.

In previous years, and in what now seems like an annual placeholder (Circa Theatre, Jan/Feb), Harper has given us the songs of Burt Bacharach and Hal David, has paid tribute to Carole King's life and music, and has been able to move through costume changes and character voices when giving life once again to a succession of jazz and easy listening divas - or when paying single-focus tribute to legends such as Doris Day.

It's actually astounding how easily Harper moves through the ages - instantly taking on an accent, and enabling a flawless recreation of classic song from the vintage era. The Supper Club, it's an impressionistic, imaginary tour of the titular venue, from one hundred years ago, and rather than have actual impersonations of the likes of Marlene Deitrich and Edith Piaf, we have characters that embody their spirit, and songs from the repertoire.

What makes these performances come alive, beyond Ali's wit and wonder, her sparkle and commitment, is the efforts here of director and set and costume designer, Ian Harman. And of course the live musical accompaniment.

In recent years, Harper has formed a bond with pianist Tom McLeod (musical director). For this show she has assembled an incredible band, in tune with both the music and the performance - perfectly in sync in terms of look and feel and costuming, and so lithe as a unit, moving expertly through eras and everything from big balladry and epic show tunes, to smaller numbers. Blair Latham switched saxophones and clarinets for guitar and flute, while Scott Maynard (double bass) and Olivia Campion (drums) provided the bottom end, warm and full and often close to intoxicating.

Ali performed classic staples (De-Lovely) in a way as to almost be feeling her way into a brand new song, such is the joy she operates with - connecting people, or reconnecting people with songs from their childhood, or from later in life but as a touchstone to the previous generations in their families.

I'd always see an Ali Harper show, because I know it's going to be full of great music, and new memories as a result. But also because I know it is going to be delivered by an expert at the top of her game, with a talented team in tow.

The Supper Club is just the latest. There will be more. There have already been so many. She's really operating in a league of her own in this country, in this field. Take the people you love for a trip to The Supper Club.

<https://simonsweetman.substack.com/p/theatre-review-the-supper-club-circa>

THE SUPPER CLUB: see www.aliharper.com for details

THE SUPPER CLUB: REVIEW

By Roger Childs for Waikanae Watchers: 22 Jan 2024

Highly Enjoyable Musical Entertainment

The Supper Club provides two hours of typical Ali Harper entertainment which is effervescent, professional and authentic. Under the direction of the highly experienced Ian Harman, the smouldering Ali sashays her way from the Roaring Twenties through to the twentieth century, singing more than twenty memorable songs in the style of the times from *De-Lovely* to the superb *I am Woman* finale. Mid way through, her rendition of Edith Piaf's *Non, Je ne Regrette Rien*, is one of many highlights.

Throughout the show she is supported by the excellent Jazz Hot Supper Club Band led by keyboard man Tom McLeod. Tom is not only the lead accompanist, but he sings a couple of impressive solos himself, and in the second half joins Ali for some entertaining song and dance duos from more recent times. Tom is skilfully backed up by the classy

- Blair Latham – saxophone, clarinet, guitar and flute
- Olivia Champion – a range of percussion
- Scott Maynard – double bass.

Ali Harper is a Circa regular and her many shows have always appealed to a wide range of age groups. She is a consummate professional and her amazing vocal range and skilful modulation, is complemented by great stage presence and excellent rapport with those watching. Her remarkable versatility enables her to sing in the manner of vocalists like Marlene Dietrich, Edith Piaf, Doris Day, Helen Reddy and Carole King, as well as exhibiting a distinctive style of her own. Not surprisingly she is in demand on Cruise Ships, in night clubs and in venues around New Zealand.

Ali always establishes warm empathy with her audience and *The Supper Club* is no exception, and as usual she does her quick costume changes to suit the era.

THE SUPPER CLUB: see www.aliharper.com for details