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Mighty Real: A Fabulous Sylvester Musical

by Winnie McCroy

EDGE Editor

Tuesday Sep 16, 2014

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Jacqueline B. Arnold, Anastacia McCleskey, DeAnne Stewart, Rahmel McDade, and Anthony Wayne (Source:Joan Marcus)

Long before there was Ru Paul, gay disco icon Sylvester ruled the roost with his wild costumes, effeminate mannerisms and disco anthems. Now, actor Anthony Wayne brings Sylvester back to tell his story, his way, in **"Mighty Real: A Fabulous Sylvester Musical."** It is one musical you do not want to miss!

The story promises a lot of ups, and some heart wrenching downs, and it delivers in spades. The show opens on a five-piece band in black shirts and red sequined bow ties. Four backup singers -- three women and a man -- join them on stage, and then out comes Wayne as Sylvester, clad in a tea-length fur coat and sunglasses, over a silver sequined blouse.

"Life is for the living, and that's what I did," says Sylvester. "I had one more chance to light up the night and set the world on fire." He starts from the beginning: his birth on September 6, 1947 in Watts, South Central Los Angeles, the oldest of six kids. Inexplicably nicknamed "Dooni," Sylvester spent his youth singing his heart out at his Pentecostal church, until sexual abuse at the hands of the choir director threatened to put out that flame.

Sylvester loved music, and blended styles from gospel, blues, Motown and rock, saying, "Music was the oasis for my soul." As the show progresses, Wayne and his backup singers perform his own songs as well as the works of other popular artists of the time, like Lena Horne, Pearl Bailey, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and Diana Ross.

The talent on this stage is overwhelming. When Wayne performs Smokey Robinson & The Miracles hit, "Ooh, Baby Baby," chills will run up your spine. The backup singers also prove up in short order, singing "Respect," "Lady Marmalade" and "Proud Mary," until Sylvester yanks them back, reminding them whose name it is that hangs on the marquee.

Anastacia McCleskey and Jacqueline B. Arnold play two of Sylvester's backup singers, the Weather Girls (aka Two Tons o' Fun) Izora Armstead and Martha Wash, respectively, and do a lot to show how this nelly black gay man became the superstar he was.

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Sylvester found his freedom in San Francisco, teaming up with the avant garde troupe The Cockettes under the name Miss Ruby Blue. It allowed him to have the confidence to resist record execs constant pleas to butch up his image. Songs like "Do You Wanna Funk," "Cry Me

a River," and "Over and Over" performed in a white suit with red heels, show that not only was Sylvester the real deal, but that he did it his way.

Eventually, the Weather Girls broke off on their own with their seminal hit, "It's Raining Men," and Sylvester was left alone. In a sad part of the show, we hear about how he was always looking for love amidst a sea of sex. When he finally found it with partner Rick Cranmer, it was only a matter of a few years before he and Sylvester both died of AIDS.

Wayne definitely has the sass to play the part of The Queen of Disco, elevating him above a mere drag queen or cross-dresser into the seminal figure of the disco (and gay rights) movement that he was. When he sings Aretha Franklin's "Ain't No Way" to a male audience member, he hits the highs until it hurts, and never for a moment breaks character.

By the end of the show, the entire audience is on their feet singing and dancing along with the talented band as Sylvester sings, "Dance" and the titular "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)." Although Sylvester's death was a sad ending, his life was a celebration, and both the Black and gay communities are stronger for the role he played in them.

Actor Sheryl Lee Ralph is co-producer of this show, and should be congratulated for not only her years of work benefitting people with HIV/AIDS through her charity DIVA and her Divas Simply Singing event, but also for having the foresight and courage to stage what could be the best Off-Broadway show of the year.

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Dig These Discs :: Toni Braxton & Babyface, Amy Ray, Jennifer Holliday, Mogwai, Nina Persson

By Winnie McCroy | Feb 17

Amy Ray goes country, and Jennifer Holliday rolls out the R&B. Mogwai drops instrumental, The Cardigans Nina Persson goes solo, and Toni Braxton goes back with Babyface for more R&B love songs.

The lives of Black, gay men are rarely celebrated, and it is even rarer to find a production with such high production values and talent. The run for this fabulous production is way too short; here's hoping that the show will find a second life at a larger venue.

"Mighty Real: The Sylvester Musical" runs through October 5 at Theatre at St. Clement's, 423 W. 46th Street in New York. For tickets or information, call 866-811-4111 or visit www.FabulousSylvester.com

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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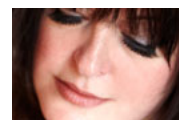
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