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REVIEW | DIAHANN CARROLL

A Familiar Favorite Served Up Fresh

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

When a great entertainer makes a conspicuous homecoming, you usually know what to expect: old, familiar songs done in an old, familiar style for a welcoming audience ready to clasp a long-lost prodigal child to its bosom, no matter what transpires onstage. But Diahann Carroll's return to New York nightclub performance (at Feinstein's at the Regency) after 40 years left open many questions. Would the star, as so many have done before her, be content to scrape the frost off a frozen lounge act and pretend it's fresh? Or would she take a chance and offer herself to New Yorkers as a woman (and performer) in full?

The happy news is that her show, *The Life and Times of Diahann Carroll*, will erase any worries about being served something thawed and reheated. Its opening number, "Come Rain or Come Shine" (prefaced by a fragment of "A Song for You"), erupts out of her like an emotional volcano. From here on, the lava never stops flowing.



Diahann Carroll

Ms. Carroll, accompanied by an eight-piece orchestra, is passionately present throughout an evening that connects the dots of a complicated career that has breached racial barriers, embracing Broadway, television, movies and Las Vegas. An astonishingly youthful and glamorous 70-year-old grandmother, she presents herself as a down-to-earth realist about the joys and rigors of show business. She neither boasts nor grinds axes.

Her air of casually worn grandeur only enhances the unpretentious honesty of her recollections, which include winning a television talent show, "Chance of a Lifetime" (the "American Idol" of its day, she jokes); receiving grooming tips from Christine Jorgensen, with whom she shared a bill at the Latin Quarter; and decades later playing Norma Desmond in a Canadian production of *Sunset Boulevard*. The forceful dramatic immediacy of her performance of "As if We Never Said Goodbye," from that show, is second to none.

Throughout the show, Ms. Carroll demonstrates her A-to-Z range as a singing actress. A rip-roaring version of the Sophie Tucker showstopper "Some of These Days" is matched in commitment by its quiet opposite, the breakup song "Where Do You Start?" A Sinatra tribute includes a swinging, sharply accented "I've Got You Under My Skin" and a bitter, leaning-on-the-piano version of "One for My Baby."

Dare I say it? In the evanescent world of nightclubs, where fabled performances still live on more often through word of mouth than through any video recording, *The Life and Times of Diahann Carroll* is historic. Experience it while you can.

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