



trodding the boards

by Brian Sands
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The Kingfish at The Joy Theater

John McConnell has been inhabiting the part of Huey P. Long in the one-man show *The Kingfish* for 27 years. After all that time, he wears the role like a custom-tailored seersucker suit.

The Kingfish: The Life & Times of Huey P. Long recently returned to New Orleans for a brief run at The Joy Theater where its streamlined single set fit perfectly. Larry L. King & Ben Z. Grant's script has Long looking down from Heaven after his assassination to relate the highlights of his life and share his philosophy. Though a somewhat stagy framing device, it efficiently gives Long/McConnell a free rein to show off

interests of Big Oil. Just like Jindal, right?

Huey P. was larger than life and had an ego to match, and McConnell, who bears an amazing resemblance to Long, follows up a detailing of the Kingfish's accomplishments with a wink to the audience saying that he's "being as modest about them as circumstances permit."

As King & Grant portray him, Long was quite the wit, getting a laugh by observing how there were "So many people who knew me who'd loved to kill me and a stranger did." What their script could've used more of, however, was Long's ruthlessness which led to Franklin Delano Roosevelt once saying of Long that, along with General Dou-



John McConnell in *The Kingfish: The Life & Times of Huey P. Long*

a style and an approach to politics that took him from small town Louisiana to the national stage, a fascinating story that never grows old.

Long brought a populist streak to government as he built roads, hospitals, mental asylums and "156 bridges" throughout the state, claiming that, with these results, he was "proud to have raised taxes." Can you imagine any politician saying that today? For that matter, Long fought hard against the

glas MacArthur, "he was one of the two most dangerous men in America."

In McConnell's assured performance, Long comes off as both a very polished and engaging rascal ("a Tom Sawyer in a toga"), and a compelling and rousing speaker who bent the rules "a little bit." A man of the people who quoted Shakespeare, it's clear that Long was no fool, an epithet that he tosses in the direction of his brother Earl.

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Though there was a technical glitch at the start of Act Two the night I saw it (vintage photos and Randy Newman songs covered well), the rest of the show ran like a well-oiled machine with smooth transitions between its various sections, a tribute to Perry Martin's still effective direction.

The Kingfish does become a bit redundant in its second act as Long continues to pontificate; by then, an audience knows how he feels. Though we get some examples of how tough he was with his colleagues and adversaries, it comes off as a little simplistic here. For a more nuanced overview of how Long came to power and how he used it, another viewing of **All the King's Men** might be in order.

Or for a more recent variation, check out New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and the Fort Lee bridge scandal. When it comes to how political rewards and punishments are meted out, some things never change.

New Orleans Ballet Association at Mahalia Jackson Theater through May 10

In his pre-performance comments, Artistic Director Jacques Heim portrayed his company, **Diavolo**, as a combination of ballet, modern dance, acrobatics, gymnastics and everyday movement that have been tossed together "like a salad." If I wasn't sure what exactly that meant, by the end of the evening I had discovered what an apt description it was.

The program was divided into two sections. The first featured four short pieces. The second was given over to **Fluid Infinities** which was commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association and had its world premiere six months ago in the Hollywood Bowl. New Orleans is fortunate to have been one of the first cities to experience this magnificent dance work.

The curtain rises on what looks like the expanded foil on one of those old Jiffy Pop popcorn pans. But the "foil" is soon drawn away to reveal a large, curved metallic skin with holes throughout its surface. This dome evokes the craters of the moon, a honeycomb of bees, a skull, a starship or even a rotting melon rind. Whatever it is, and it might be all of these, it is visually dazzling as it moves and rotates with perfect coordination.

To the pulsing rhythms of Philip Glass' **Symphony No. 3**, the Diavolo dancers ascend the dome, disappear through its holes and return on its underside in this demanding work conceived by Heim and choreographed with precision by the eleven member company.

There is a sense of conquest, of

awe, of discovering the unknown, and of struggle as dancers, singly and jointly, explore this brave new world. Shadows and reflections, courtesy of John E.D. Bass' ingenious lighting, add extra dimensions to this already many-layered opus.

I found it all elegant and stylish, moving and deeply involving. **Fluid Infinities** is mysterious and ambiguous, not in a confusing manner but, rather, in an astutely artful way which allows different associations to be evoked in the mind of each viewer. And the live performance of Glass' music by the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO) brought an added immediacy to the evening. Conductor Glenn Langdon propelled the score forward bringing out its rumbling basses to marvelous effect.

By contrast, I felt that the works in the program's first half were neither as intellectually challenging nor as emotionally engaging, fun to watch but a bit repetitious after a while, their underlying ideas beaten to death.

D2R, which used dancers in a human pachinko machine, had a gripping intensity and a powerful ending though there was a certain redundancy to its variations. **Knockturne**'s very French, lyrical tenderness could not prevent this love duet involving two dancers and a door from becoming visually static before its six minutes were up.

Bench, all silly fun as dancers competed for its namesake object, was well done but, like **D2R**, its variations were all too similar. And if **Humachina** provided one of the evening's most stunning images, with three dancers standing astride the curved edge of upright quarter circles suddenly appearing as though out of nowhere, the rest of it could've used more such "Wow!" moments.

In all fairness, a few people I spoke to afterward preferred the first part of the evening to the second. I, however, could see **Fluid Infinities** an infinite amount of times without ever tiring of it.

NOBA continues its season with **The Joffrey Ballet** (March 29) and **Parsons Dance** (May 10) which will feature a world premiere with music by New Orleans' own Allen Toussaint. Can't wait!

New Orleans Opera Association at Mahalia Jackson Theater through April 6

New Orleans Opera Association continued its season of rarities with Massenet's **Cinderella (Cendrillon)** which was given its American premiere in New Orleans in 1902 and deserves to be better known for its luscious score.

G. Alan Rusnak's simple but effective sets allowed the focus to stay on the music and performers where it belonged. Hypnotic and beguiling, full

of long phrases, Massenet's composition was sung superbly by an impressive cast.

Judith Gauthier was most affecting as the poor girl who winds up a princess. Her crystal clear voice aptly conveyed longing, joy and innocent love as well as the score's more somber moments when, in this version of the tale, she decides to run away and die all alone.

Marie Lenormand cut such a convincing figure as Prince Charming that I thought she was a man...until she began to sing. Lenormand touchingly brought out the Prince's melancholy which transformed into joy immediately upon seeing Cinderella. Lenormand and Gauthier's passionate duets were some of the performance's highlights.

Properly following the libretto, Luretta Bybee never allowed Mme. de la Haltiere, the classic nasty stepmother, to become a complete gorgon. Rather, without overdoing it, she came off as an imperious, social climbing, haute bourgeoisie who happens to sing with a subtle comic edge.

Veteran baritone François Le Roux's sensitive voice was well-suited to the hen-pecked husband yet loving father of Cinderella who finally shows some backbone.

As the Fairy Godmother, Kathryn Lewek sang gorgeously, each of her notes falling like perfectly formed drops of rain.

As always, conductor Robert Lyall led the LPO commandingly, bringing out the delicacy of Massenet's music and getting its essential "French-ness" just right. For this outing, the flute and piccolo section was especially outstanding.

Lyall, along with director Jose Maria Condemi, wisely kept a brisk pace yet allowed the more contemplative moments room to breath. Condemi's staged the opera straightforwardly which was fine, though the slapstick routines Condemi devised for the step-sisters, while not inappropriate, could've been sharper and more imaginatively done.

Taken from the same fairy tale that inspired the Disney movie, it was no wonder that the matinee audience was filled with little girls, one who wondered out loud in the first act "When's Cinderella going to come on?" For that matter, despite Massenet's beautiful music, I half-expected to hear one of Rodgers and Hammerstein's songs pop up from their version of the tale. Silly me.

For those who want to know what **Rent** sounded like before it was transplanted to the East Village, NOOA returns on April 4 and 6 to conclude the season with Puccini's classic **La Bohème**.

Sutton Foster Broadway@NOCCA

Sutton Foster returned to New Or-

leans in January for her second go-round of **Broadway@NOCCA** and she was again delightful. Even more importantly, Seth Rudetsky returned to host this series returning it from the pure cabaret of Charles Busch's and Alice Ripley's visits to the more fun and frothy cabaret/interview format.

As before, Rudetsky led Foster through interesting career moments to get her take on how she got to where she is today. Apparently she learned how to yodel for **Young Frankenstein** only *after* she told the producers she knew how. She then gave a demonstration of her yodeling technique that showed how well her chutzpah paid off.

Chutzpah, though, is not the word you typically associate with Foster. She's less "diva" and more "girl next door" which made her so perfect as the lead in **Thoroughly Modern Millie** for which she got her first Tony Award. And if she's not a natural Reno Sweeney she sounded great singing *I Get a Kick Out of You* and, hey, she did win her second Tony for that role in **Anything Goes**.

In the course of the evening, we found out how she was able to play Éponine on Broadway in **Les Misérables**, a role that typically went to a shorter woman (after ten years, they were more open to diversity in the cast) and what it was like performing at the Kennedy Center Honors for Shirley MacLaine (Fun!).

We also learned that she's pals with Lea Salonga, a Tony winner for **Miss Saigon**, who regularly beats her at Words With Friends. And that Foster auditioned for the movie version of **Les Miz** but didn't get it.

Which is a shame because her version of *I Dreamed a Dream* was absolutely wonderful. What a pleasure to see a pro dig into a song like that and make it seem so effortless.

When asked by a NOCCA student for advice, Foster said to avoid unfamiliar songs when auditioning but to blur gender lines with songs written for the opposite sex. Her fantastic versions of *Hey There*, *Oklahoma!* and *Being Alive* made a strong case for this.

I left with just one tinge of regret. Singing songs from some of the many roles she could play (Nellie Forbush's *A Cockeyed Optimist* ("I am a cockeyed optimist," she declared.); Charity Hope Valentine's *If My Friends Could See Me Now*; Fanny Brice's *Don't Rain On My Parade*—a WOW-zer even without any rehearsal!), it seems unlikely that Foster will soon have a crack at creating a new role of her own as such icons as Mary Martin, Ethel Merman and Carol Channing regularly did. Even her forthcoming return to Broadway will be in a revival (**Violet**).

So would someone please write Sutton Foster a musical she can call her own?!

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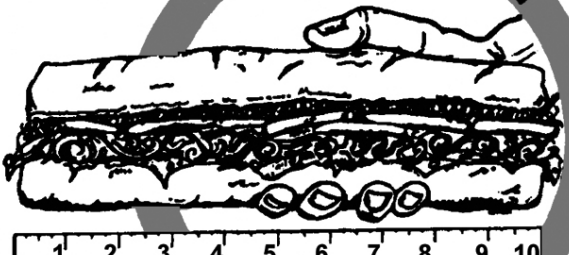
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Dominique DeLorean in North Shore Divas @ Billy's



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The Club Scene ~ New Orleans, Metairie, Slidell ~ Photos by Frankie Fierce, Charles Jenkins, Tony Leggio, Chuck Hinkley, Paul Melancon, Jeremy



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