

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Lillias White Sparkles at the Samueli

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, January 29th, 2020

Lillias White brought her one-woman cabaret show to the Samueli Theater at the Segerstrom Center for the Performing Arts for a limited engagement. Heretofore, I was unaware of this Tony-winning performer who's been delighting audiences since her Broadway debut in *Barnum* in 1981. I narrowly missed seeing her since my high school went to New York in 1980 and we saw *Barnum* before Lillias took over the role of Joice Heth from the woman who originated the role. Lillias went on to rack up an impressive array of nominations and accolades, including a Tony for her performance in the Cy Coleman musical *The Life* in 1997.

Lillias took the stage in a sparking black top over a black ensemble which matched her ebullient spirit as she unleashed that distinctive voice and shared anecdotes with the audience of her life, on stage and off. She prefaced her show with a few choice words about the current occupant of the White House. Based on the audience applause, it was a welcome palate cleanser to address the ubiquitous elephant dominating the public arena as the country grapples with the intensely fraught state of affairs amidst the 3<sup>rd</sup> impeachment in U.S. history. Lillias was here to lift spirits for a performance she deemed "The Happy Show" and that's exactly what she did.



Lillias White showcases an eclectic cabaret act from R&B to Broadway at the Samueli Theater in Orange County.

The first thing you'll notice about Lillias is her effervescent and salty personality. But it's when she sings that you understand why that full-bodied voice infused with rich tones made her a natural on the Great White Way. It was not your typical night of Broadway songs and standards one would normally anticipate. She started the show off with a song from one of her favorite cartoons, the theme song from *Mighty Mouse*. It's not a song you're likely to find in the Great American songbook, but it captured White's positive outlook on life and showcased her vocal prowess which was *mighty* indeed.

Over the course of the evening, Ms. White sang a medley of songs from her illustrious Broadway career, including "Brotherhood of Man" from *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, "Thank God I'm Old" from *Barnum*, and "I am Changing" from *Dreamgirls*. The evening offered an eclectic mix of songs which ranged from the Harold Arlen/Johnny Mercer tune from 1944 "Accentuate the Positive" to one of Aretha Franklin's lesser known covers called "Brand New Me" to one of Queen's sappier love songs from the 70's "You're My Best Friend." She was also not above doing a little name-dropping of famous friends and composers she's worked with, including

Marilyn and Alan Bergman, the songwriting team best known for their decades-long collaboration with Barbra Streisand. Lillias did her own version of “The Way He Makes Me Feel” from the *Yentl* soundtrack. In her own words, she “Lillias-ized” it. Lillias turned up the sensuality inherent in the lyrics, and well, let’s just say it diverged quite a bit from Streisand’s lush “like melted buttah” rendition, though I admired the effort.

One of the highlights of the evening was Lillias’ performance of “The Oldest Profession” from the Broadway musical which earned her a Tony. Lillias warned the audience that when she performs the song, the character, Sonya, a world-weary, aging prostitute, takes over. Lillias made a three-course meal of the song in a tour de force performance that justified her need for a towel to dab the perspiration on occasion during her set. In true cabaret fashion, Lillias shared a few anecdotes about her life as well as her vocal gifts, the heartache of some failed relationships and the resilience that demonstrates a performer’s mettle and makes them relatable. She took us down memory lane, painting a picture of how she performed on the dining room table as a young girl, wearing a crinoline dress, patent leather shoes and ribbons in her hair, covering songs made famous by Shirley Temple, among others. If the job of the cabaret artist is to enchant, captivate and enthrall, Ms. White succeeded on all counts. She ended the evening on a sweet and sentimental note with “When You Wish Upon a Star” reminding us to “make our dreams come true because this is all we have right now.” And she capped that off with an encore of a powerful rendition of “Home” from *The Wiz* which brought the audience to their feet.

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