



SUPERNOVA OF SENSATION

ANYTHING YOU CAN DO, ALAN CUMMING CAN PROBABLY DO BETTER **BY STACY DAVIES**

SCOTTISH ACTOR ALAN CUMMING first burst onto the American scene in the sleeper indie classic *Circle of Friends*. Since then, he's morphed into rock legend Mick Jagger (*Viva Rock Vegas*), a goat-man (*Refer Madness: The Musical*), a brainless inventor (*Tin Man*), Hitler (*Jackboots on Whitehall*) and the iconic Nightcrawler in *X2*.

He's also won a Tony for his performance as the draggy emcee in *Cabaret*, published a novel and created his own designer fragrance, Cumming. This weekend he'll be performing his new one-man show at OCPAC, *I Bought a Blue Car Today*. He spoke with me by phone from New York.

The District Weekly: **Alan, you know you're an overachiever when**

you even have your own cologne. Alan Cumming: I was just spraying some on as you speak, as a matter of fact. My office smells a bit stinky (it's not my lovely assistants, but my dog), so I'm spraying some Cumming around.

So . . . if you already are Alan Cumming and then you spray more Alan Cumming, what happens? A supernova of sensation.

I bet! So, what prompted you to do this one-man show? Well, I've sung a few songs and told a few stories in my time, and I used to do stand-up a long time ago—and I like the way you can connect with an audience through that sort of thing. But I'd always shied away from it because I thought it was too scary. It's a very difficult

concept as an actor to suddenly be just you, and you're asking people to come see that. But last year, the Lincoln Center did their *American Songbook* series and they asked me if I'd do a couple of performances. So, I bit the bullet and said yes—and then immediately panicked. I ended up getting a whole show together. And while I was doing that, I was also becoming a citizen of America—so this show took the shape of my 10 years of living here, culminating in [my] becoming a citizen, and the title of the show is a line I had to write down in my test to prove my prowess in English.

When I read that you came here 10 years ago, I thought, 'Oh my god, he came during the worst decade in modern American history!' [Laughs] Yes, well, Clinton was still president when I arrived, but I remember coming home from rehearsals every night in *Cabaret*, where my role was basically to fondle most of the genitals of the cast before the evening was out, and watching the news and all this furor over Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, and I remember thinking, 'Why are they vilifying this poor girl, and what's going on in this Puritanical, weird society?'

I apologize on behalf of all Americans for that and for the years that followed. [Laughs] Yes, thank you. Thanks, America! It's fine, though. You've made up for it.

Are you drawn to over-the-top characters? I quite like playing people who are extreme and who are very different to myself. In America, actors tend to develop a persona, and then people want to see them do roles that are similar to what they've done. That's something we don't have in Europe.

But you're still considered a sex symbol, even when you're creepy. [Laughs] I don't know about that! But I think that people recognize someone who's comfortable with themselves, someone who's open and not ashamed. I think that's attractive.

So you're confident and you can do everything—sing, dance, act, stand-up . . . What the heck are you bad at? [Thinks for a long time] Hmm. Oh, I know! What's that thing when you dance and you put your neck to the side—you know, that kind of Egyptian thing?

The Janet Jackson thing? Yes! The Janet Jackson neck thing! I can't do that. My husband *can* do it, however, and always does it just to infuriate me. Oh, and I can't say the word L-I-B-R-A-R-Y properly. I say "librarrrrary, librerrrry." I can't do it; I put in too many Rs.

I hope that's going in your show. Neverrrrr.

WORTH THE ADO

LONG BEACH SHAKESPEARE DOES SOMETHING GOOD WITH 'MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING'

There are many ways to think about Shakespeare. The worst, though, is as a given—that just because it's *Shakespeare* it has inherent worth. No, Shakespeare was just a guy who wrote plays, and it's for you to determine how good they are and whether each performance is worth the time it takes to watch it.

But a play like *Much Ado About Nothing* and a production like Long Beach Shakespeare Co.'s makes that determination easy. Good play? Check. Worth your time? For sure.

One thing Shakespeare is *not* is realistic. For all his profundity and insight into the human condition, his plays are fanciful. No one ever talked like this, and no concatenation of events was ever so contrived. But in *Much Ado* LBSC fully exploits these facets—as Shakespeare himself undoubtedly did—going beyond asking for suspension of disbelief by doing everything short of diving into metafictional waters to remind you you're watching a play, from addressing more than just asides to the audience to the ludicrous physical unreality of Benedick's and Beatrice's hilarious back-to-back eavesdropping scenes. It's completely unbelievable—and delightful.

This approach helps make the static set and few props function effectively, with subtle but fine changes in lighting being all there is to convey differences of place and time.

A bad cast can sink the best designs, but this one keeps everything afloat. Maurice Shaw plays his Don Pedro with a properly princely bearing, while Benny

Briseno and Erica Sims fully animate Benedick and Beatrice's "merry war." Sims is particularly outstanding, with a look and presence that you cannot take your eyes off of.

If there's one element that doesn't come off as it might, it's Dogberry and the Watch, which in general isn't played silly enough to elevate the very low comedy to the realm of funny.

Also, there are also a few moments that seem misinterpreted. When Don Pedro and Claudio arrive in the play's final scene, for example, they are curiously jocular in the midst of what for them is clearly a somber circumstance.

However, these are but small blemishes on a sterling production, one that reminds us that the Shakespeare tradition is worth keeping alive. "God save the foundation," indeed! **GREGGORY MOORE**

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