

One Sweet Song

Bennett Law reviews two CDs of less-than-stellar performances

I learned in a college acting class that the secret to being a good liar is to be specific: the more detail you include in your lie, the more credibility it has.

Here I Am, advertised as "A Musical Personal Ad" written and performed by aspiring 27-year-old New York writer-actor David Sisco, is a song cycle of gay discovery, coming out, and search for romance. The navel gazing and self-absorption of its central character suggests a Sondheim-esque sensibility, and a couple of the better numbers ("Here I Am!" and "Uncle D") would not seem out of place in Sondheim's *Company*.

But *Here I Am* lacks the verbal dexterity and wordplay that distinguishes Sondheim. And perhaps more to the point, David Sisco isn't a good liar. He shortchanged his oppor-

tunities to illuminate universal themes and generate an emotional response in his listeners by relying on worn stereotypes to tell his story. Almost nothing about his songs is fresh, clever, or intellectually engaging. For example, the travails of a fifth grader ("Fifth Grade") are so inconsequential to an adult gay man (can you believe it? – he was the last one picked for gym!!) that the song is tiresome. Sisco strains to wring grand emotions from what are, in retrospect, minor slights.

Sisco is a pleasant singer, and demonstrates deft dynamic sensitivity, but he was not gifted with a compelling voice. He unfortunately demonstrates a lack of awareness of his vocal limitations with a disastrous foray into blues singing with "Baby, You'd do Right by Me" for which he just doesn't have the chops. In a cringe-inducing performance, heulti-

**Here I Am:
A Musical Personal Ad
David Sisco**
One Soul Records
www.davidsisco.com

**Latter Days,
the Soundtrack
Various Artists**
Centaur Entertainment
www.centaurmusic.com

mately screams much of this number.

To be fair, there are some good ideas underlying a couple of the pieces. I found "Beautiful Boy," a song about the beautiful boys Sisco has loved (as opposed to the pretty boys), the beginning of an exploration of a lovely concept, but it too quickly dissolves into insipidity. Along with "Here I Am!," the only truly successful number in the song cycle is "Uncle

D," in which Sisco recounts how he adores his sister's daughters but longs for children of his own. This number communicates the specificity it needs to feel honest and real.

The complete song cycle *Here I Am* won the Alex Libby Award for Best Musical Performance for its presentation in September, 2002 at the Columbus National Gay & Lesbian Theater Festival. It may be more interesting in a live performance, but I am not inclined to give this CD another spin.

The movie "Latter Days" has an exhilarating pedal-to-the-metal start: the picture opens on a handsome Los Angeleno primping for a night out. There's a knock at the door, which he answers with an aggressive offer: "I'm going to give you the blow job of a lifetime." The guy at the door is helpless against this lean and hungry shark, but it's not until after his – um – mind is blown that he clarifies that he actually has come by to take the shark's *female* roommate out on a date. This case of mistaken identity both provides for the immediate estab-

lishment of characters and promises a lusty sex romp to follow.

From that charged up opening, though, this pleasant film mellows out and takes a softer route to its conclusion. Appropriately enough, the soundtrack is true to this structure. The first cut is energetic electronica – good driving music. Subsequent tracks, though, generally mellow out, some of them dangerously close to being numbingly derivative – at their worst, almost even porn-video banal.

One sweet exception stood out for me: a love duet entitled, "If I Could Be With You Now" is charmingly performed by two men, Dean Nolen and Bobby Joyner. It's not so much that the song is exceptional, but having the two men trade off lines in the kind of power love ballad that once dominated the top 40 pop charts helps to enliven this otherwise listless soundtrack. ▼

Bennett Law listens to sound tracks in Bethel.

The Gay Beginning

David Carter's documentation of the roots of rebellion in a neighborhood bar takes reviewer Joel Rosinsky back to his adolescence on the streets of New York.

When asked to review this book, my initial thought was "How in the world am I going to fit this into my already ridiculous schedule?" I took the book and brought it home, leaving it on my coffee table for a while, feeling guilty about agreeing to review it in the first place. That is, until a few days later when I opened it and started reading. The guilt left and was replaced by exhilaration as I was swiftly drawn back into the events that many of us feel marked 1969 as the year that launched the Gay rights movement. I couldn't put the book down.

Even from the first few pages, I was finding myself reliving my teen-age years in Greenwich Village. I had arrived in 1963 and left in late 1967, two years before the events at Stonewall. The bars and clubs I went to were mostly on the east side of Sixth Avenue, not in the west village, but they all suffered from the same abuses by the police who

were paid off and the mob that owned them. Author David Carter has well documented the part that Ed Murphy played in the running of the Stonewall for the mob. But his reputation earlier in the sixties when I hung out in the clubs was one of a low-level wiseguy who had done time in jail. And he was known for having murdered a 13- or 14-year-old boy he was involved with. This young boy had stolen something from Ed. When the boy just disappeared one day, it was common knowledge that he was dead. The bars were not safe, but they were all we had at the time.

We might ask just what was so special about the events that led up to those six days at the Stonewall. Answer: They helped change and focus a splintered, politically impotent movement into a power to be reckoned with. Carter describes in detail the social and political conditions of the times in New York City. It was an election year, and it was well known that in New York lots of votes were to

**Stonewall
The Riots That Sparked the
Gay Revolution
By David Carter**
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be had for "cleaning up the city." A concerted effort was being made to close down the gay bars, and there were no protections: it was illegal to serve alcohol to homosexuals. Both the police and the mob were free to abuse gay bar customers because most of the patrons felt there was no recourse, no place else to socialize.

Carter's description of the bars is depressingly accurate. They were dark and dingy, the windows painted black to protect the anonymity of those who hid inside. They were always overcrowded with not enough fire exits. The drinks were watered down and expensive, and the bars were frequently visited by the NYPD

who liked to arrive unannounced to intimidate the patrons and pick up their payoffs. They would show up at the door, and in seconds the lights would come on and the music and dancing would stop. People wouldn't even speak to each other while the police were there. We would just wait until the police left and the "danger" passed. Then the lights would be turned down and the music would resume until the next time. And there was always a next time. Carter's interviews with people who lived through these events gives witness to the oppression and damage perpetrated on the gay community in a time when you could be fired, refused service, or arrested for just being gay.

Carter goes into great detail about the various political groups formed leading up to and after Stonewall. He chronicles much of the infighting that is a natural part of any movement trying to find a direction, and define its purpose and goals.

Looking back from 2004, I can't help but wonder how different the world would be for all of us, if not for a disorganized group of folks who back in 1969 spontaneously said to themselves: "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not gonna take it anymore." It didn't appear to be such important an event at the time. There was no way to know exactly what was being planted in the

consciousness of a community, but suddenly the back of the bus was no longer acceptable and a movement was transformed.

Fortunately, the book also brought back lots of wonderful memories for me, like the time I lived at the Albert Hotel on University Place with my friend Upjohn (don't ask, it's a long story), and late one night, in a club on east 3rd Street above the old firehouse, Brandy Alexander explained where and how everything gets tucked when dressing up in drag.

For those who are too young to have lived through the years before Stonewall, Carter's book is a wonderfully accurate documentary of that period of gay history. As a community, we owe it to ourselves to know where we came from. If I can borrow a line, "It was the best of times and the worst of times." I really, really enjoyed reading David Carter's *Stonewall* and reliving the best of times. ▼

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