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Céline Dion towers over the Vegas Strip

Michael Giltz

An Advocate.com exclusive posted November 27, 2003

The only thing queerer than a gay man going to a Céline Dion concert is a gay man taking his mother.

But if you're in Las Vegas for your brother's wedding celebration—and your mother saw glimpses of Céline's heart going on (and on) on *Oprah*—the extravaganza at Caesars Palace is a must-see.

Certainly, Las Vegas seemed like the center of the world the weekend I visited. Michael Jackson, who was in town shooting a video when he was charged with child molestation, came right back here from California after his arrest and release. (He led the media on an O.J.-like car ride through town, shaking the hands of fans on the street when his car stopped at traffic lights.)

Siegfried and Roy are everywhere, thanks to billboards and ads sending encouragement and best wishes to the erstwhile lovers after that life-threatening accident.

NBC has a promising new drama that is set on the Strip ("Las Vegas" on Mondays at 9 p.m.), the latest in a recent string of shows doing so, including *CSI*, *The Real World*, a reality show about showgirls, and of course, *Showgirls*. And Elton John promised to give Céline a few weeks off here and there by committing to five concerts a week, five weeks a year during the next three years in the Colosseum, the impressive new venue built just for her. (David LaChapelle will help keep the sequins flying as John's production designer and director.)

But it isn't exactly a gay old time, even though Vegas switched its ad campaign from family-friendly back to Sin City. When they say "What happens here, stays here," it's a reference to the standard naughtiness of a businessman away at a convention. On countless street corners you'll find magazines and fliers touting escort services bursting with women for men. And bathrooms are filled with ads from college girls just done with their studies and looking for fun. (What, the college boys are rushing off to grad school?)

The male strip shows advertised are of the Chippendales variety. One show—featuring male strippers from Australia and called "Thunder From Down Under"—had ads featuring buff shirtless men in the family-friendly, medieval-themed *Excalibur* hotel that said "What knights do at night"—but I don't think they meant it the way I took it.

You can certainly search out gay nightlife, but wander the main casinos (whether at the moderately priced *Excalibur*, which is a good bargain, especially if you're bringing the moppets along) and you'll find yourself spotting the occasional gay person with all the regularity with which you'd find one at a Republican convention: They're there, but they're not exactly conspicuous.

Céline and the boys

And then there's Céline, whose concerts are sold-out months in advance and gross more than \$2 million a week—not counting the merchandising that must flood out of the Céline Dion store right next to the Colosseum. Her crowd was distinctly well-dressed compared to the very casual—even sloppy—standards in the rest of Vegas. (Maybe those tickets peaking at \$225 encouraged people to make a night of it.) And the Colosseum had a nicely elegant feel, looking like a more intimate version of Radio City Music Hall.

But why settle for elegant when you can have over-the-top? Created by Franco Dragone of *Cirque du Soleil*, "A New Day..." features around 60 dancers, gymnasts, musicians, and singers on a massive and deep stage that would be the envy of any Broadway house. Stairways glide up out of the ground just so Céline can walk up them triumphantly for a brief moment. Trees bloom, massive prop instruments and street lamps float through the air, dancers dance, and at the center

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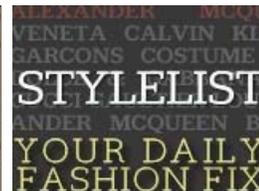
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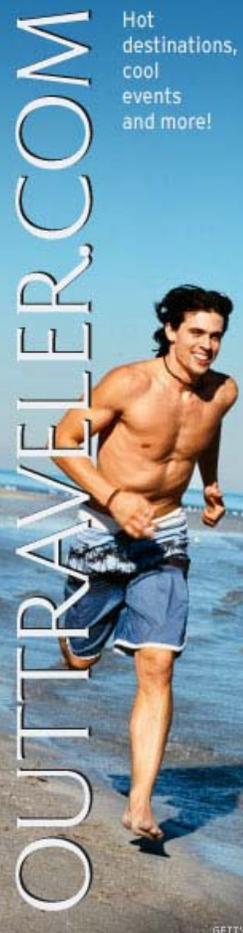
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of it all is the diminutive, Calista-thin body of Céline.

Once in a great while you might lose track of her actual form, but that voice is always, massively, front and center. It's a formidable roller coaster of an instrument, with every swoop and dive engineered and planned out at the start. You're guaranteed to be taken for a ride, even if fans of subtlety or at least a hint of personality might long for something less mechanical.

The show begins with Céline crooning "Nature Boy," one of the few relatively quiet numbers (even the ballads are booming affairs), and mostly, you're tensely aware of how much power is in reserve. But Céline is surprisingly adept at all the dancing and movement that's called for, blending in well with the dancers that soon cavort across the stage.

Her stage demeanor is the real treat for anyone looking for guilty pleasures. Céline may be the most sincere person in the world, but her fierce professionalism ensures that every wink, every line of dialogue feels scripted down to the last sigh. In true Vegas fashion, she insists that she feels a lot of love in the room, loves us all very much, and is honored to be performing for us, the people that she loves almost as much as she loves her husband-manager and son. If there's a casual aside, you just know she delivers it exactly the same way every single night, and you love her for her being unable to pretend otherwise.

Time and again Céline will plant her legs defiantly like some Amazonian warrior and let loose with a thunderous volley. At other moments she ends a song by seeming to stumble out of a trance, looks around dazedly and is surprised to see us. *Oh, am I still singing in front of a crowd?* she seems to be thinking. *I'd forgotten where I was. Wasn't that marvelous? I don't know how it happens. Should I sing another one?*

And she does. One number follows another, with each tune inspiring a production more grand than the one before. During one dizzying moment (a song dedicated to all the parents of the world and all the children of the world, which pretty much covers everyone), Céline sings a song for her son while a massive tree appears in the background, and two workmen floating across stage in midair carry a grand piano between them. For one brief moment you'd swear avant-garde stage director Robert Wilson had turned to making music videos.

Whether she's singing standards like "At Last," a Stevie Wonder classic like "I Wish," the Chrysler ad campaign number "I Drove All Night," or that little ditty from *Titanic*, you forget individual songs and simply soak in the spectacle that certainly delivers a bang for its buck. (Though the one "sexy" number, with male dancers shirtless and writhing on the floor around Céline, is about as steamy as a duet between Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme.)



The guys, warming up

It's no particular slam on Céline to say the star of the show is what is billed as the largest indoor LED screen in North America, which fills the entire back of the stage; this state-of-the-art screen is filled with images of stunning clarity and depth throughout the show. In one number Céline seems to be standing in a massive outdoor Gothic cathedral with a storm-tossed sky roiling in the background; in another she's in Times Square; in yet another she's gliding through space with a massive moon looming up close and then fading far, far away.

At one point the real Céline is standing onstage left in profile, but a camera is projecting her image onto the screen. The result? She is looming over herself and all the dancers, staring straight out into the audience with such intensity that you have no choice but to focus on the cyber-Céline rather than the life-size one now lost in the shuffle.

This screen and the astonishingly convincing scenes it creates are breathtaking: Once the technology becomes more affordable, it seems inevitable this will revolutionize theatrical productions on Broadway and the road. One giggles to think what Elton John and David LaChappelle will do with it once they get a chance to play with this marvelous new toy.

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