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Sinatra and Sinatra

Two different Southwest Florida theaters paying tribute to Ol' Blue Eyes



BY NANCY STETSON
nstetson@floridaweekly.com



Two different Southwest Florida theaters paying tribute to Ol' Blue Eyes

Sinatra is cool. That's all there is to it.

To his many fans, he epitomized cool.

Sinatra was a best-selling crooner, Las Vegas attraction and movie star. He won Grammy Awards and an Oscar. He performed on radio, TV and stage. An iconic singer of the 20th century, he sold more than 150 million records worldwide.

"I think you could say he was an alpha male," says Ted Wioncek, associate artistic director of Players Circle Theater in Fort Myers. Wioncek has the double pleasure of not only directing "My Way: A Musical Tribute to Frank Sinatra," but also performing in it. (The show runs from July 30 to Aug. 18.)

"A lot of women wanted to be with him and men wanted to be him," he says. But, in Wioncek's view, "It all comes down to the material, to the songs. I love art from all eras, but boy, you hear this music, and—I hate to say this—you go, 'They just don't write songs like that anymore.'"

This musical revue, conceived and created by Todd Olson and David Grapes, premiered in 2000. It has since had more than 500 productions and has been seen by audiences in all 50 states.



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Richard Mutkoski, Natalia Mock, Steven Butler and Charlotte Crowley star in "My Way" at Venice Theater.

This summer, in Southwest Florida, two different theater companies are producing it – Players Circle in Fort Myers and Venice Theater in Venice.

"We know in Florida we have a huge audience for Frank Sinatra," says Brad Wages, head instructor of the education and community engagement program at Venice Theatre, where he's directing "My Way." (It runs at the Venice Theatre from Aug. 9 to Sept. 1.)

He knows the show is popular with their patrons; they staged it three times before, in 2003, 2004 and 2009, and all three runs sold out quickly.

"I'm hoping to see younger faces in the audience too," Wages says. "I teach our teens and mid-20s acting classes, and I tell them, 'You need to see this.' They know 'New York, New York,' but I hope to introduce them to his other songs."



Mendini, Wioncek, Suskind and Faraco star in "My Way" at Players Circle Theater in Fort Myers.

The show includes 55 of Sinatra's hits, including "Fly Me to the Moon," "All of Me," "The Way You Look Tonight," "One for my Baby," "The Lady is a Tramp" and the iconic title song, "My Way."

"His music spans decades, it captures the romantic in all of us," says Wioncek. "This is a man who created eras. He literally defined the music of the 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's. Just his time in the spotlight alone is impressive; it's dictated our country's cultural zeitgeist."

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"I cannot pick a favorite song that I love; I love every single one of them. I think the audience will feel the same way too. I am entrenched in an era I didn't even grow up in."

Harmonies and staging

In "My Way," the music is sung by a quartet. At Players Circle, they are: Kimberly Suskind, AJ Mendini, Ruthgena Faraco and Wioncek.

At Venice Theatre, Steven Butler, Natalia Mock, Richard Mutkoski and Charlotte Crowley will perform the Sinatra tunes.



Richard Mutkoski, Natalia Mock, Steven Butler and Charlotte Crowley star in "My Way, A Musical Tribute to Frank Sinatra" at Venice Theater. RENEE MCVETY PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY PHOTOS

There are solos, duets, trios and times when all four are singing in harmony.

"Everyone has their moments (in the show.) There are eight or nine solos," says Wages. "'I Only Have Eyes for You' starts as a solo, and then they add on, so it becomes this lush harmony."

His performers also sing "New York, New York" and "My Way" in four-part harmony.

"The arrangements are similar to what Sinatra sang," Wages says. "We found these incredibly really tight jazz harmonies when all four are singing. The harmonies are gorgeous, beautiful."

"It's an evening of ear candy and eye candy."

For their production, Players Circle is transforming their theater into a lavish 1940's nightclub with an onstage jazz trio.

"We're eliminating the east and west end of the theater and putting in experiential banquet seating," says Wioncek. "Those audience members will have an opportunity to sit closer to the stage and interact with the performance. You won't know where the nightclub ends and the theater begins; it will be all beautifully melded into one location. You'll feel like you're walking back into the Copacabana, back in the day...We hope to transport the audience to a different time and place."

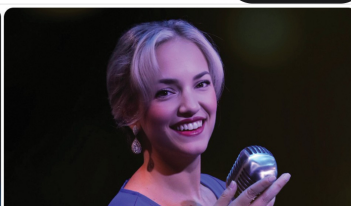


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Kimberly Suskind, AJ Mendini, Ruthgena Faraco and Ted Wioncek star in "My Way" at Players Circle Theater in Fort Myers. COURTESY PHOTO

"There's also a live video component. Not only will there be various pictures, videos and montages of Sinatra, but also a live feed of the actual presentation itself."

Parents

Neither director ever had the opportunity to see Sinatra in concert, though Wioncek saw Frank Sinatra Jr. perform.

But both grew up listening to Sinatra, because their parents did.

"I'm a Jersey boy, born and raised," Wioncek explains. (Sinatra was born in Hoboken, New Jersey.)

"I grew up listening to almost nothing but Sinatra, because of my parents and grandparents," Wioncek says. "He was worshipped in Jersey big time."

Wages recalls how his parents saw Sinatra perform in Las Vegas and how it changed them.



WAGES

"He was old, then," Wages says. "Everyone in my small town in Oklahoma were country music fans, all we had were country music records. My parents loved to go to Vegas. They came back (after seeing Sinatra) and they were changed. They loved their country music, but these albums started showing up and a different style of music was played in my home.

"My redneck folk have found good music! I didn't have to listen to Conway Twitty. It was very cool.

"My Mom didn't surprise me as much, but my Dad was a goal of boy, but he'd sing along with the music. He found this man and identified, or found a way to enjoy his music.

"I think every time you hear a song, there's always an emotional attachment, somehow," Wages says.

He remembers his parents talking about Sinatra. A song would come on the radio, and his mother would turn to his father and say, "Remember that night we danced at the club?"

"I think every audience member is going to experience that numerous times," he says. "His music wraps people in this really warm blanket of sound."

"When you listen to the music of Sinatra, it's (magical)," says

Wioncek. "Sometimes you hear a song and it warms your heart. But when you hear a Sinatra song, it's like you're wearing your heart on the outside of your body." |

In the KNOW

"My Way: A Musical Tribute to Frank Sinatra"

• **When:** July 30 – Aug. 18

• **Where:** Players Circle Theater, 13211 McGregor Blvd., Fort Myers

• **Cost:** \$35-\$55

• **Information:** 239-800-3292 or www.playerscircletheater.com

"My Way: A Musical Tribute to Frank Sinatra"

• **When:** Aug. 9 – Sept. 1

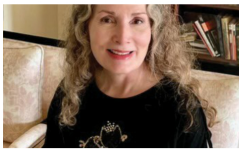
• **Where:** Venice Theatre, 140 Tampa Ave. West, Venice

• **Cost:** \$37, \$22 for college students & educators, \$15 for youth

• **Information:** 941-488-1115 or www.venicetheatre.org

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