



‘A Beautiful Noise’: Neil Diamond and the unbreakable spirit of the individual

New Broadway musical conquers loneliness and Parkinson's disease

By Jeffrey Scott Shapiro - - Tuesday, May 9, 2023

NEW YORK — I recently experienced an unforgettable Broadway musical chronicling Neil Diamond’s story with performances of his most memorable songs. The biographical drama is a heart-warming celebration of Mr. Diamond’s uplifting music and inspirational life. When the singer-songwriter learned he could no longer perform his songs because he has Parkinson’s disease, he helped conceptualize a musical so that others could.

“A Beautiful Noise” is a salute to Mr. Diamond’s 1976 album by the same name. The show is a biographical musical drama that tells his life story through a series of flashbacks that arise during sessions between today’s Neil Diamond (Mark Jacoby) and his therapist, Lu Katzman (Linda Powell), who helps him cope with not being able to perform anymore. When Mr. Diamond is reluctant to open up, the therapist cleverly baits the singer by opening one of his songbooks and asking about his songs, each one telling a different chapter of his life. The play depicts his days growing up as a lonely Jewish teenager in Brooklyn, his early success as a songwriter and then singer, and his rise as a world-class performer with record sales that outpaced Elvis Presley’s.

The script by Anthony McCarten is an emotional tale about how loneliness can affect all of us at every stage of life despite our professional and social successes, and how we overcome it.

In his youth, a young Neil Diamond (Will Swenson) turns to his imaginary friend, Shilo, to feel understood. In the beginning stages of his career, he copes with isolation in a dusty Memphis motel room, struggling to write a hit song, which materializes into “Sweet Caroline.” At the height of his career, the singer is often struck by sadness when his performances end, forced to leave the stage that enabled the star to escape his loneliness. We learn all of this as the older Neil Diamond fights back tears with his therapist, who wants him to realize he can find happiness without performing.

This point is illuminated when Mr. Diamond returns home after performing “Cracklin’ Rosie” and confesses to his future wife Marcia (Robyn Hurder), he already sees “clouds,” his term for feeling sad. Before breaking into a duet of “Song Sung Blue,” Marcia quotes her grandmother, telling the singer:

“She said, everyone has two wolves fighting inside of them, two wolves really goin’ at it, one wolf is happy, hopeful, and the other wolf, angry, sad, lowdown. And I asked her, my grandma, ‘So which one wins?’ She said, ‘The one we feed.’”

“A Beautiful Noise” is about the inner wolves that lurk within all of us, and the journey we take to feed the “happy, hopeful wolf.” For Mr. Diamond, his happy, hopeful wolf was fed by thousands of cheers onstage, and when the cheers were gone, it starved. Being told he could no longer perform as a result of Parkinson’s was like being told his happy, hopeful wolf would starve to death.

What makes this story so relatable is that while most of us do not rely on stadium performances to feed our hopeful wolf, we rely on something — acceptance, money or status — so we do not feel isolated, rejected, alone or insignificant. We convince ourselves that without something, someplace or someone, we can’t be happy. In the end, Mr. Diamond realizes this isn’t true. He can be happy without the stadium cheers, a fact that is soon evidenced by his decision in real life to produce the musical.

When Mr. Diamond realised he could no longer use his gifts as he did, he found fulfilment by passing them along to other performers. One of those performers, Mr. Swenson, plays the younger Neil Diamond. Raised in Utah in a Mormon community, Mr. Swenson grew up on Mr. Diamond’s music, and was so moved by it, he practiced doggedly for years to sing like him. He most likely never imagined he would one day step into the shoes of the musician he admired most. But by doing so, he has given young audiences a chance to experience the live music Mr. Diamond performed for decades.

The show also gave Mr. Diamond an opportunity to perform again when the world least expected it. At its gala performance, Mr. Diamond quietly watched the show’s maiden performance from a box seat at the Broadhurst Theatre. In what was planned as a group singalong of “Sweet Caroline,” Mr. Diamond surprised the audience when he arose and opened the song. While Mr. Diamond was expected to only open the song, the performers onstage remained silent as he sang it to the end. In that moment, he declared victory over Parkinson’s disease, and slew the angry, sad wolf.

Neil Diamond’s music has always been aimed at the individual, ensuring all of us that while we sometimes feel alone, we are not. The heartfelt music and lyrics of songs like “Shilo” (performed gracefully by Deandre Sevon) and “America” were reminders that no matter who or where we are in the world, and what challenges we face, the spirit of the individual is unbreakable — a gift Mr. Diamond gave to the world for so many decades — and finally accepted in his own heart at a time he needed it most.

“A Beautiful Noise” is a beautiful story with awe-inspiring performances, brilliant production and unforgettable recreations of the music Neil Diamond gifted to the world — a reminder that no matter what “clouds” we feel inside, none of us is ever truly alone.

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