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CABARET

The Most Beautiful Woman in the World

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photo credit Conor Weiss

Who comes to mind when you see that phrase—Catherine Zeta-Jones, perhaps, or certainly Grace Kelly? Most would concede the title belongs to one glorious, gracious and violet-eyed lady – Elizabeth Taylor.

Elizabeth (ET from hereon in) was known for her films, jewelry and various husbands, but there was much more to that woman. The perfect person to let us in on the side we never saw is Ann Talman, who played her daughter in *The Little Foxes* on Broadway. Chosen for her uncanny resemblance to ET as a young girl, they remained close friends until ET's death in 2011. Through song and story, Ann paints a portrait we never would have imagined—the prankster, surrogate mother, the fashion advisor funny-face maker and more. When consulting with her about what to wear to an awards gala, ET arranged for a private fashion show at Saks and then added “Do you want to borrow any of my jewelry?”. Now that’s a friend to have!

The evening began with Ann singing “The Shadow of your Smile” from *The Sandpiper*, a film that starred ET and Richard Burton against a backdrop of ET holding a sandpiper. In the film, the bird is a metaphor for broken-winged people, and Ann shyly admits that she had been a sandpiper. Ann was 22 when they met, and she explained how ET took on the surrogate mother role and gave her the support and counsel she needed. When Ann talks about pajama parties and drinking Soave Bollo, one imagines two sisters sharing secrets and giggling. (I can’t imagine ET in PJs, can you?) Nevertheless ...

As if the offer of shared baubles was not indication enough of ET’s generous nature, Ann gave a brief history of ET’s involvement with AMFAR (American Foundation for AIDS Research) as well as her own foundation.

This show was powerful, yet delicate, informative without being gossipy, funny while evoking a tear or two. It was lovingly put together with superb direction by Lina Koutrakos with Alex Rybeck as music director. The songs flowed so naturally that it might have been easy to not recognize the skill that went into their selection.

Ann’s ability to mimic ET’s breathy voice as well as her sincerity, added to the charm and verisimilitude of the event. It was such a loving tribute, with little touches, like purple Mardi Gras beads, a printed program and cupcakes with lavender frosting for all in celebration ET’s birthday this week.

The evening ended with a reprise of the first song. Thank you, Ann, for giving us a clearer picture of the shadow behind that most alluring smile.

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