

## One Show Finds Broadway Heaven & Another is Caught Up In Wall Street Hell

By Byron Smith

This weekend I watched as two producers chose separate paths in dealing with the devastating effects that the economy has – and is likely to continue having – on Broadway. As it turns out both shows were excellent but only one will make it to the big stage. This is not because either one lacked quality but because one set of producers made the right bet on the economy and one did not.

First, I was there when Mitchell Evans announced before a stunned audience that *Dark Damages* was going to close – before going to Broadway – even though everything about the show was going as best as could be hoped. Every review was good, every cast member ranged from good enough to actually perfect and there were promising ticket sales. At the end of what will likely be the show's last run for quite some time Mr. Evans walked on stage to explain that all of the investors had decided that they were better served to forfeit all of their investments to date than to commit to its February 1<sup>st</sup> opening on Broadway. He confirmed that by January 1<sup>st</sup> he had to sign long term contracts with the Palace Theater and front substantial money to the star who would be joining the cast at that time (rumors were flying around that it would be William H. Macy). What was made very clear was the reason for this decision. "None of us are rich and this certainly is not the time to invest money in a show when the chance of a huge Broadway collapse are evidenced everywhere".

On the other hand, one show that will definitely be coming back to Broadway with a big bang is *Rock & Roll Heaven*. The producers have moved away from the traditional out-of-town opening, previews, limited run, extended run format by



*Numerous Broadway theaters with long-running shows are going dark after New Year's*

announcing – 6 months ago – that they intend to do a two week limited engagement on Broadway *before* going on the road and then coming back to Broadway at the end of 2009 or early 2010. It was not at all clear what their reasoning was when they announced this strategy but it appears from watching the show that they knew exactly what they were doing. Appearing before a hand picked audience and various theatrical and educational organizations, they were able to introduce the show to critics and bulk ticket purchasers long before they intended to bring it back to New York. It is a risky strategy because if you do not have your show in order before the critics review it, there are no second chances in this business. Apparently it worked because I am told that the producers are already guaranteed of 40,000 seats on Broadway through bulk sales.

In addition, it turns out that the other reason for opening in New York first was to film segments of the show's cast for use with an apparently delightful tie in television game show that will air simultaneously with the show's re-

opening by early next year. That show is loosely built on identifying who's who between various look-alikes and the actual performer.

As far as the six stars who make up the cast of *Rock & Roll Heaven*, Bob Conroy and T.D. Bowen as Johnny Cash and Ray Charles respectively excel but not much above the remaining five performers who individually and collectively are Tony Award material. The choreography by Broadway veteran Cynthia Sterling is a little bit over the top but atoned for by great opening and closing numbers. There are some great songs here, not only from the essential clones that mimic (quite accurately) the performances of those legendary stars they portray but also three new tunes by Grammy Award winner Lou Graham.

The theme of the show, which I guess could loosely be called a plot, is Ed Sullivan's untimely decision to make a comeback to cash in on the nostalgia craze. There are several reasons as to why this comeback may be considered untimely, according to the storyline, but one of them is not Ed's decades old demise. Apparently

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# **Broadway Heaven, Wall Street Hell**

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he plans to rebuild his career as Dead Sullivan, and rely upon many of the great rock performers of the past who reside in his neighborhood in heaven. From this loose storyline, the director intricately weaves concert, variety show, and plot lines through the clever use of interplay between heaven (taking place on a video screen) and earth (where the essential performers are able to give their stunningly entertaining and accurate concerts mimicking the great 50s artists that they are portraying.

I can't wait for this show to return to Broadway, but meanwhile I understand that they will be appearing in several road shows and from the videos I've seen it is surprising how many ways someone can look like Ray Charles!

# Heavenly Review Awaits Broadway Return

By Kevin Baxter

These are hard and odd times to be opening a Broadway show. Especially one that's not a revival. All over Broadway, talk is of shows closing in view of the current recession. Yet, last week for the holiday season, a unique, quaint and thoroughly delightful review that was originally scheduled for a full-fledged opening at the Palace Theater, announced that it was scheduling a limited run at the Fairlane Theater prior to its return to Broadway next year.

The producers obviously had their reasons, including kicking off a campaign of road shows before the scheduled big Broadway re-opening. They also had tie-in to an upcoming reality TV show that appeared fairly interesting and needed this time period to film segments.

While the audience was largely selected to enhance that reality TV, show its response was real. This is a show like nothing that's been on Broadway before. Ostensibly taking place in heaven, it draws from the wide variety of available gone-into-the-beyond entertainers who created the rock genre. While there was an implied promise made to rock's superstars that they would stay young forever, this show is apparently the one place where that promise could be fulfilled.

The script follows the creator of the TV variety show-Ed Sullivan (herein known as Dead Sullivan) in his decision that the time was right to revive his career-



*Brian McCulloch to make Broadway debut as Roy Orbison when Heavenly show returns for fall opening*

even if it was necessary to relocate in heaven. Moving back and forth between the TV show on screen and live concert performances of deceased stars on-stage, the producers have created a gimmick heretofore unseen in these parts. At times, the transition back and forth can be a little choppy, but not in a way that can't be worked out. Ultimately, it ties the whole production together in a clever manner, making the best use of weaving video into the live action segments. However, there is a delightful twist to the story that makes the entire concert performance in Heaven part of a grander theme..

Nonetheless, there is a lot going on in the show that aside from the aforementioned twist, might not hang together well were it not done so professionally.

First, the concert, which is the core of the show, featuring look-a-like, sound-a-like, act-a-likes of such founders of rock and roll as Bobby Darin, Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, James Brown, Ricky Nelson, Roy Orbison and Buddy Holly.

What's remarkable about these actor clones is not how closely they resemble the originals, but the fact that the producers swear that they are wearing no make-up. Can there actually be people out there who look so much like these superstars, who could also sound like them and carry all of the nuances of their personality? If you had asked me before the show, I'd have to say "Unlikely" but now the answer is a resounding "Yes!". Then there is the score by Lou Graham whose music is quite familiar to those in the Broadway/rock genre. His music, both compliments and augments the concert performances of the aforementioned stars who rely extensively on the hits of the artists they are portraying. There is a great title song, called of all things "Rock and Roll Heaven"(Not to be confused with the Righteous Brothers hit of several years ago that has become a standard) which is a hit record on its own.

Then there is the grand and great multimedia show that surrounds the live performance. Produced by Grand Graphics, whose credits go way back to Beatlemania, it relies not only upon computerized wizardry to make its presentation on six part split screens, but also on

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some historically wonderful images—both motion and still—drawn from the historical archives of Rock and Roll's late Greats. There are indeed some wonderful private home movies that grace the screen during the performances that make the entire production worthwhile on its own.

Cynthia Sterling did the choreography in her unique style and if there is little here that is original, it still carries enough charm to enhance the key elements of the show. The dancers are enthusiastic, but slightly over-the-top.

Bob Conroy, Ellis Burkes, and Richard Simon as Bobby Darin, Ray Charles and Buddy Holly are the best of an already great lot of in-concert mimics. The show was a little short, but I understand that they are adding twenty minutes of content as it returns to Broadway. It closes next week and returns only after the producers follow through on their plans for an extensive road show tour which has already been organized. The producers unveiled a video of their alternate road show cast who they intend to utilize in the anticipated kick off of the tour and it's apparent that they've found more than one outstanding copy of each artist. In fact, Brian McCulloch who will be joining the show in Las Vegas, is anticipated to return to Broadway in the role of Roy Orbison, and his return should shore up the show's weakest element.