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[HEADLINE]

Jersey Boys: Hitting All the High Notes

[TEASE]

I've never been a big fan of musical theater or the Four Seasons. So when my sister nagged me into seeing "Jersey Boys" at the Palazzo Hotel and Casino, I went grudgingly. Turns out she was right. The show's a winner. Who knew the story of Frankie Valli and the gang was so darned entertaining?

[ENTRY]

"Have you seen it yet?"

I'm on the phone with my sister in L.A., and by "it" she means the musical show "Jersey Boys." She's asked me the same question three times in the last three weeks, ever since she found out the Broadway hit had opened in Las Vegas.

"Not yet," I tell her. "Soon."

"You'll love it," she assures me.

Odd, because she knows I'm not a big fan of musicals. I've never had much patience for stories that stop to break into song and dance for no apparent reason. Not only that, I've never appreciated Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons, whose 40+-year history provides the backdrop for "Jersey Boys." Having grown up on the West Coast, my tastes ran more to the Beach Boys. Truth be known, I always found Valli's falsetto a little annoying.

But none of this matters to my sister, who ends the conversation by saying, "You're just going to have to trust me."

So there I am, trapped. As soon as I hang up, I say to my wife, "Honey, we're going to see 'Jersey Boys.'" She looks at me as if I've lost my mind. Oh, well. At least it will provide fodder for my column.

So that's how we found ourselves at the new Palazzo Hotel and Casino on a recent Thursday night. A couple things you need to know about Las Vegas locals, or at least *these* Las Vegas locals. First, we rarely go to the Strip. It's just too much trouble, fighting the crowds and the prices. (I imagine people who live near Disney World don't frequent that place, either.)

It's even rarer for us to take in a show. In the 27 years we've called Las Vegas home, we've seen maybe six of them. Siegfried & Roy (comps), Penn & Teller (ditto), Blue Man Group (half-price deal at Christmastime), Cirque du Soleil (bandwagon effect), Brad Garrett (a friend opens for him) and Love (anniversary). I'm sure I'm leaving out a couple, but you get the idea.

Similarly, we don't feel the need to check out every new casino that opens its doors, so this was our first time at the Palazzo. All I can say is, it's elegant and understated by Las Vegas standards. Which means it doesn't look like someone threw up all over the carpet.

Parking was underground and convenient. We pulled into a spot right near the elevators where Four Seasons music flowed from the speakers. Talk about marketing geniuses. A long line greeted us at will call, although we arrived an hour early. Unlike, let's say, the U.S. Post Office, they had plenty of open windows and we were in and out in less than five minutes.

"Make sure you're in your seats 15 minutes early," the gal told us. "The show starts precisely at 7." A model of efficiency.

Not so the Grand Lux Café, a tiny upscale snack bar nestled near the box office. With only nine seats, it's incapable of handling the crowds seeking a quick bite before showtime. A burger, Greek salad and two drinks took more than a half hour and set us back \$29 and change. At least the food was good.

On our way into the Jersey Boys Theater, women dressed like bobby-soxers hawked programs (\$20) and Broadway cast CDs (\$25). We took a pass. The tickets themselves cost \$141.40 for two; we had opted for the cheap seats because, as my thinking went, it's *a musical*. As long as you can hear the show, what difference does it make?

As the pleasant young usher escorted us to our seats at the very top row of the nosebleed section (officially, "mezzanine"), I began to have second thoughts. Being the entrepreneurial type, the usher offered to move us 25 rows down. When we shook hands to seal the deal, I showed my gratitude by slipping him a twenty. It's nice to know that some Las Vegas traditions never change.

I actually recommend sitting up in the mezzanine instead of springing for the more expensive floor seats, which will cost you double. There's so much going on in this show that it helps to have an elevated view of the proceedings.

The theater holds 1,800 people and, except for the mezzanine section, was filled to capacity. Like everything else at the Palazzo, it's sparkling new, with unobstructed views and a killer sound system. The only downside: The seats are narrower than the ones on Southwest Airlines. I sat next to Theresa from Kentucky, who Seinfeld would call a "loud laughter." A little extra space between us would have been welcome.

From the opening strains of "December 1963 (Oh, What a Night)," "Jersey Boys" moves at breakneck speed. The story is told from the viewpoints of all four original members: Tommy DeVito, Nick Massi, Bob Gaudio and Frankie Valli. It traces the group's evolution from the early days singing doo-wop under a lamppost, through various name changes and lineups, scrapes with the law and the mob (not all the Jersey Boys were "good" boys), to the group's rise to the top of the charts, personal tragedies, the inevitable breakup and the emotional reunion as inductees into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

The dialogue is smart and fast-paced, but it's the music that holds it all together (I never realized these guys had so many hits), and this current cast, many of whom starred in the national tour, doesn't disappoint. A few times, I caught myself thinking I was watching the real Four Seasons, right down to Valli's signature falsetto (which sounds better live than it ever did coming out of my tinny car speakers).

I also learned a lot of new stuff:

- Joe Pesci (yes, *that* Joe Pesci) was their boyhood friend.
- The group's name came from the Four Seasons Lounge and Bowling Alley.
- The title "Big Girls Don't Cry" was based on a line from a John Payne western.
- The career-long partnership between Valli and Gaudio (the songwriting wunderkind) was a handshake deal.
- The Four Seasons sold more than 100 million records.

The audience, made up of three generations of fans but mostly boomers, broke into wild applause after every musical number. At show's end, they gave the cast not only a standing ovation but a *dancing* ovation. Make no mistake: This is a Broadway-quality production.

So my sister was right. I had a great time and have a newfound appreciation of the Four Seasons. Before "The Sopranos," before Springsteen, as Tommy DeVito's character says, "We put Jersey on the map." I believe it.