

Madonna: The Re-Invention Tour 2004

Madison Square Garden: June 20, 2004

Performance Review by Alan Bennett Ilagan

She is, quite simply, the undisputed Queen of Entertainment. For over twenty years she has entranced, enraged, and engaged our collective interest and fascination. Madonna has always been about more than mere appropriation and re-invention. She is the pre-eminent Entertainer ~ a Lady of Renaissance whose artistic output has included books (of wildly different genres), acting (of wildly varied success), and, of course, music (of wildly consistent triumph). It also includes what is perhaps her greatest role ~ live performance. A Madonna concert is no ordinary rock show, and she proves this once again on her current Re-Invention Tour.

Whatever the political leanings and religious overtones the show provides, the overall point of this production is entertainment, and no one has ever done that better than Madonna. Who else could bring such disparate elements as a skateboarder, flame-slinger, drum-corps, acrobat, tap dancer and a bagpipe-player together into a unified spectacle of grandiose achievement? It doesn't always work, but there's never a dull moment.

This is a rollicking show for those looking to have a good time. Credit Madonna's willingness to return and revisit her past hits (the ones she eschewed on 2001's Drowned World Tour). Most of her biggest singles are here, including twelve Top Ten songs (seven of which went to Number One). That's a pretty impressive set list ~ and it's a telling testament to her body of work that it represents only about half of her entire hit collection.

The Re-Invention Tour is a less theatrical outing than previous tours, but equally-packing in punch and pizzazz. In fact, by focusing mostly on her classics and hits, the music takes center stage. Avant garde artistry and political statements aside, it's always been about the music.

The opening opulence of *Vogue*, which finds Madonna rising from the stage in various yoga postures, tells us that this is a welcome return to form. ("Strike a pose" takes on an entirely new meaning here.) As the bass builds into *Nobody Knows Me*, Madonna dances solo on a moving conveyor belt, encapsulating the "many lives" she's had. Alone and strutting peacock-like across the stage, she is the consummate performer – one of that rare breed of people who can simply stand there and command the attention of thousands simply by being themselves. *That's* entertainment.

A straight-forward reading of *Frozen* illuminates the main focus of this production – Madonna's voice. It is in stellar form, better than we've ever heard her in fact. Strong, supple, and consistently on-key ~ it is the unifying thread of this production

and, one might argue, her entire career. Considering all of the style changes, image makeovers, and re-invention she has embodied through the years, the one thing that most people seem to ignore is the evolution of Madonna's main instrument. In speech and conversation it is unremarkable – whether it's slightly nasal, slightly British, or slightly pontificating. When she sings, however, there is more emotion and feeling than the present pack of bland and faceless American Idols put together. There is also a courage and bravery to go against the grain and make a statement, something the aim-to-please pop people tend not to do.

That risk-taking pays off in the previously problematic single *American Life*, which gets the full-on political and provocative treatment that was unthinkable a year ago. This time the images are at once jarring and mesmerizing, and the song itself is resuscitated in a head banging hard rock redux. It is exhilarating stuff, but muddled as well. When she breaks into *Express Yourself* her message gets even more mixed. As cartoon soldiers march and dance on video screens, and dancers perform rifle drills on stage, Madonna wields her own rifle as a stylish accessory to the combat fatigues and Che-beret. It's hard to tell whether she is glorifying violence and war in a fashionable homage, condemning it, or simply poking fun at it – which, given present-day circumstances, is not that funny. But contradiction has always been part of her edgy appeal, and anyone who has paid her the slightest heed over the last few years cannot doubt that she is above all else a proponent of peace. As the sounds of military marching die down, Madonna straps on a guitar for rock-inflected versions of *Burning Up* and *Material Girl*, the latter backed by an all-out audience sing-along and lending a little levity to the proceedings.

The light-heartedness continues with a Fellini-esque circus segment that features Madonna as a cabaret showgirl in a sequined striped corset, with flapper headband and red high-heels, effortlessly executing some neat dance steps for *Hanky Panky*, and delivering a sultry, slow-burn jazzy revision of *Deeper and Deeper*. With an opening staccato of strings, she slips into a fiery tango for *Die Another Day*, before being strapped to an electric chair for the chilling *Lament* from *Evita*. It is the final flourish of heavy-handed dramatics before a wise return to the fireworks of her music and songs.

Rising from faux-oblivion, and decked out in a chic sleeveless black pantsuit, she strums a guitar for an acoustic version of *Nothing Fails*, one of the stronger tracks from the under-rated *American Life* album. It's a nice lead-in for what almost everyone has come to see ~ *Like A Prayer*. She performs a simple but powerful solo version ~ no dancers, no pyrotechnics, no over-the-top staging ~ just Madonna, singing what many people consider her best song ever ~ and her fans, singing right along with her, carrying her music, calling her name, and bringing her home. "Every one must stand alone," she sings, but at that moment we are all standing together.

She dons the guitar again for a searing performance of *Mother and Father* – the evening's most potent display of her vocal prowess. For the last few notes she seems to

expand a full octave, along with exhibiting a musicianship the world once thought her lacking. The show stumbles a bit when she covers John Lennon's *Imagine*. Madonna is Madonna because she has never been one to embrace sappy sentiment, and though her views and beliefs have clearly evolved over the years, *Imagine* is just too obvious, too overdone in a post-9/11 world.

What may be most shocking to her tried and true fans is that Madonna repeats herself for the first time in her career. Unlike Cher or Janet Jackson, whose last few tours were virtually indistinguishable as far as their respective choreography and set lists go, Madonna has never recycled (think of the many and varied treatments she has provided for such perennial classics as *Like A Virgin* and *Holiday*). The travesty occurs in *Don't Tell Me*, originally performed with cowboy line-dancing choreography in 2001, which was fine when it was fresh. Madonna re-invents only the costumes this time around, giving the song a Parisian vibe, but the choreography remains startlingly the same. Paris is not the place for line-dancing, especially by the likes of Madonna.

She manages to erase the misstep magnificently, turning another unlikely culture-clash into a surprisingly effective pop amalgamation ~ a Scottish-influenced bagpiper-laced version of *Into the Groove*, and Madonna and her dancers in kilts. Thus begins the final section of the show ~ an all-out, no-holds-barred groove-fest. *Into the Groove* and *Papa Don't Preach* transport us back to time when she pranced around happily on stage, reveling in the joy of a dance step and a great pop song, all unbridled energy and youthful exuberance. Twirling around like a giddy dervish ~ back where she belongs ~ she was a girl again, full of hope and glee and beckoning the world to dance along with her.

Crazy for You was dedicated to all the Fathers in the audience (it being Father's Day), as well as to her husband. It is the song she usually dedicates to her fans, and it is nostalgic and heart-wrenching ~ after all these years she is still here ~ still entertaining, still inspiring, still living and loving and showing off like no one else. The night culminates with the one-two punch of *Music* (her latest #1) and *Holiday* (her very first hit). It is a fitting finale, one that brings her, and her audience, full circle.

Despite its minor shortcomings, there is really no greater show on earth. Though she may want to be the Queen of Enlightenment, spiritual and otherwise, she can never renounce her throne in the world of entertainment. For over two decades she has ruled on high. Pop princes and princesses come and go, but a true Queen endures. Long may she reign.