

# TOP DRAWER

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By E. Michael Lockley · August 23, 2011

*Top Drawer* is an autobiographical solo show that follows one woman's struggle to reconcile with her past. The show starts with Dad surprising his 9-year old daughter, Adelaide, with a trip to the Broadway show *A Chorus Line*. Upon exiting the theater, her father grabs her and they do the can-can down the sidewalk (despite Adelaide's embarrassment). These first moments showcased her father's love and his significant role in inciting Adelaide's stage aspirations. From then on we learn of Adelaide's family history.

Her father is a concert pianist who has been exiled from Cuba, and her mother, a would-be opera singer, comes from a tradition of socially prominent "WASPs." Adelaide's parents met during her mother's first marriage, and as that marriage began to crumble, their romance blossomed. The couple had in common that their families didn't think their artistic pursuits were worth their energy. They were both told "you will not be one of the greats," so neither valiantly pursued their aspirations. Instead they found solace in being rebel partners in crime, performing at home for each other. Their relationship initially came under scrutiny because Adelaide's grandmother required that her daughter marry "top drawer." However upon learning that her soon-to-be son-in-law was from a well-to-do family in Cuba, she let go of her reservations, and the two were married. One of the most memorable moments of the show is when, at their wedding, the groom is asked why he is crying; his response is "Because I never thought I'd have this."

Unfortunately, it was indeed too good to be true. After Adelaide's birth, her father came to terms with his sexuality and Adelaide's parents separated. Her father was gay and though he had fallen out of love with his wife, they were able to have a friendship that lasted beyond the ties of marriage. Adelaide's relationship to this discovery made for a unique childhood that involved visiting her father at his boyfriend's vacation house and having to watch in support as her father struggled to come out to his parents over the phone. However without question, the most defining moment of Adelaide's life was her father's suicide.

The play jumps back and forth between a middle-aged Adelaide on a trip to Cuba to visit her father's family home and Adelaide's childhood into adulthood in Manhattan with her mother. In Cuba Adelaide is on the hunt for her father's piano and in Manhattan she is seeking to find herself especially as a performer. The strength of the show is Adelaide's intricate re-telling of the details of her parents' history and their relationship, as well as her own relationship to them. Much of the play is cleverly underscored with music from musicals and a particularly stand-out number that Adelaide performs with constrained emotion as her mother is "A Very Unusual Way" from the musical *Nine*. As I watched the show it was apparent that there were many topics to cover—her near denial of her Cuban roots, her

mother's choice of men, her own struggles with self-worth. But ultimately the primary issue that Mestre is tackling is how to value her father and by consequence herself despite her father's depression, denials and deceptions. There were moments when digressions from this father-daughter story felt a bit too long-winded.

The set is basically a screen for projections center stage, and a piano on the opposite side of the stage. Though projections in some theater can go to the extremes of being overused or underused, I felt that *Top Drawer* uses projections to its advantage. The screen helps to showcase location as we jump from areas of New York to Cuba and is used to highlight particular moments in Adelaide's journey to self-acceptance, from a reflection on her grandmother's critique of her mother's singing voice to Adelaide's own revelatory vocal lesson. The projection affected me most when it was used to bring to life Adelaide's dialogue with her father. Oftentimes, his responses to his daughter are displayed as italicized text on the screen, accompanied by a quaint musical underscoring. These were some of my favorite moments because they really brought to life her father's sincerity in a way that only seeing the words could. Without any attempt of imitation or characterization her father came most alive, which was really endearing.

*Top Drawer* is sincere, sad and yet triumphant. While I wish that it could have been more concise, watching Mestre discover her value and her calling as a performer, is inspiring to any artist who has struggled with both the professional and personal ups and downs implicit in the artist's life.