

# TOP DRAWER

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FringeNYC Festival Review  
By Geoffrey Paddy Johnson · August 22, 2011

Behind many a lime-lit smile beats a bruised and battered heart. Adelaide Mestre, the singer and actress whose self-authored show, *Top Drawer*, is playing at the Bowery Poetry Club during the New York Fringe Festival, comes with a unique understanding of this dark knowledge. Scion of a socially prominent family, whose parents were both somewhat transgressive artistic types, her upbringing was bright with the aura of musical showmanship and comfortable gracious living.

Her mother was an opera-singing socialite, her father an exiled Cuban concert pianist. A heady romantic courtship between these two resulted in the end of her mother's first marriage and an eventual elopement of the Park Avenue princess and her Latin lover accompanist. But her mother suffered from the familial assessment that her operatic abilities would never be more than fair, and her creative outlet was stymied as a result. Her father's secret sorrow, one that would eventually prompt his suicide, was that he was homosexual, and tortured by the knowledge. As a set-up it has almost a classical ring for the evolution of a feisty young performer struggling to emerge from the professional and personal shadows of her parentage. And struggle she did in one of those unfocused, erratic, episodically self-destructive courses pursued by embryonic divas the world over.

But my, how lightly now she seems to wear it in this musical tale of her gradual reconciliation with her history. Confused and off course as she is thrown by her up-bringing, she generously steps to the side here, allowing the swan songs of her parents' stories the greater part of the spotlight. In a deeply touching instant, she impersonates her mother singing for the family a desperately sad rendition of "A Very Unusual Way" from the musical "Nine." The voice, one she tellingly informs us she is more comfortable singing in than her own, is searingly rung with a sorrowful understanding of the love that sparked between mother and father, a love no less genuine for being peculiar. Ravaged by self-doubt, her mother could only ever sing before an audience with her eyes tightly closed. Surrounded by privilege as she was, it is this poor self esteem that Adelaide the artist has inherited. There are several haunting moments like this in the performance. For all her would-be Broadway swagger, Mestre has a keen appraisal of the tender, the poetic. In one allusion, as she recalls a later visit to a remote aunt in a crumbling Cuba, she speaks of a collection of family photographs that seem to have faded from too much viewing.

The same aunt gifts her with a couple of old recordings of her father's piano recitals. The vinyl records are antique, chipped and covered with mold, having languished in a tropical climate of stagnation and disintegration. The conflicted, distracted young Adelaide carelessly disposes of them amidst her household clutter, but the image prevails, lingering over the proceedings like a

phantom wound. When we are eventually treated to a sample of these early, scratchy recordings, the music is fused with feeling as it drifts out over our heads in the hushed auditorium.

Mestre has a naturally winning stage presence, casually dazzling. And this is fortunate for her as, during the night of my viewing, be it first night nerves, or a want of rehearsal, in her enthusiasm to tell her tale she frequently fluffed her lines and even lost her place in the narrative, prompting her to reach for an iPad which she consults, absently dropping around stage like a favorite old clutch purse. She might stop during a line to insert an omitted word, and in one instant she actually paused her pianist to restart a song when she dropped a couplet. It is to her credit as a performer that she sails through such blunders with hardly a ruffle, her smile confidently assuring “you all know where I’m coming from.” Distracting as these moments might be, in some measure they add to the sense that you are witnessing a real individual on stage telling a real story about real people. There is an underlying modesty about her performance, which effortlessly transcends any gaffes.

When she lets loose with a song you can see and hear the real artistry. She has a gem of a song at the end, “Looking for the Light,” written for her by John Mercurio, which would grace any high-end Broadway production. Her accomplished and stalwart piano accompanist is Doug Oberhamer. Coco Cohn directs with a minimum of fuss. A lovely evening awaits.