



MISSES CO

Real versus illusion? It's all in fun for a good cause.

BY LINDA L. MEIERHOFFER • PHOTOS BY LANI GARFIELD

You've seen them around town: The full-color ads touting some long-stemmed lovelies, including the oldest showgirl in the world who still performs. But there's another bunch of long-stem Palm Springs beauties who, once a year, make up for their lack of performing longevity with large doses of glamour, hard work and show biz pizzazz.

When long-legged Aday Thomas—all porcelain skin and demure glances—strides onto Hotel Zoso's stage this month with the other members of Les Originales during a six-

minute opening number, we'll be immediately transported to "Carnavale" in Rio.

It's a labor of love for the drag performers who've spent four months rehearsing with professional choreographer Wayne Fleischer and whose costumes shine like the North Star under Richard Byford's professional lighting design.

In the full glory of their alter egos—including the very Kim Novak-esque Sabrina Darling, Crystal Glitter, Bobbi Pinn, et. al—each of these "showgirls" will high-kick and lip-synch their way into the audience's hearts by embracing their feminine sides. All it takes is miles of sequins, press-on nails and sparkly, high-heeled pumps that run size 12 and up. As Les Originales take the stage for their 16th year, it's all for a good time and for a good cause.



INGENIUALITY

FOOD ASSISTANCE FOR THE HIV/AIDS-AFFLICTED

“After Evening under the Stars, this is the second largest fundraiser of the year for the AIDS Assistance Program,” says Timothy Wheelock, aka the lovely Aday. “Our goal this year is to raise more than \$100,000 and to have a sold-out show,” he says. The 2010 event, “Carnavale des Originales,” provides critical support to the operation of this non-profit, volunteer-driven organization. “We distribute \$600,000 in food vouchers per year to low-income men, women and children who are living with HIV/AIDS,” says Chris Campbell, AAP’s client administrator. “And we do it with no government assistance and a bare-bones, two-person staff.”

THE TRANSFORMATION

Richard Barbaro, a Palm Desert makeup artist who is one of the original founders of Les Originales, appears as himself in the show. The rest of the male cast—whose day jobs include those of hairdresser, sales representative and caterer—don wigs whipped as high as meringues on steroids and glue on eyelashes as long as Bossy’s to bring their female personae to life.

“Each one of us begins our character in the makeup chair,” Wheelock says. “My makeup is done by celebrity stylist Chip Tuvman (featured in last month’s Desert Magazine) and takes about two hours from base to lashes. It takes another two hours from body padding to nails,” he says.

At a recent photo shoot to publicize this year’s show, the mood was festive and, well, girly.

Above, from left: Sabrina Darling, Aday Thomas, and Bobbi Pinn, members of Les Originales.

LES ORIGINALES

Pantyhose adjustments aside, these performers take their arched eyebrows, pouty painted lips and camera poses as seriously as runway models. When a visitor comments on the black lace gown worn by hairdresser Billy Lamer, stage-named “Salem Vega,” the 6-foot-1-inch Lamer’s response is unexpected. “I make my own gowns, and I attached every one of these crystals onto this dress.” It’s not just the long black curls and purple glitter eye shadow that make him hard to miss, “I’m 7 feet tall if you count hair and heels,” he says, grinning.

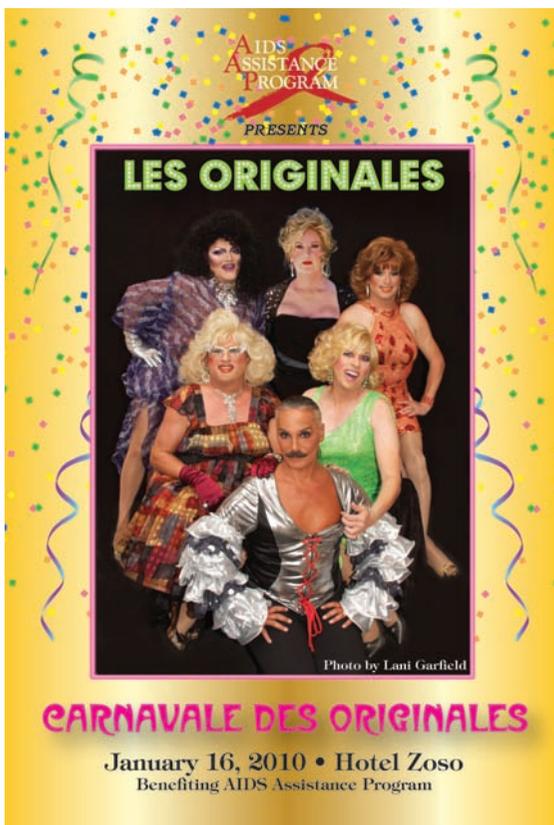
One costume change later and another of Lamer’s original creations is unveiled; it’s a sheer lavender number with an asymmetrical hemline. The secret to wearing it? “A nude bodysuit underneath,” he says with a husky laugh.

These guys know from ready-to-wear. “Elena Perrone, a local couturier, creates gowns for me like those seen in *Town & Country* or on the red carpet at the Academy Awards,” Wheelock says. “Each one of us has a definite and distinct personality that comes through in the costumes we wear and the way we present our character. The only gowns I’ve worn more than once are Bob Mackie designs, but they’re my favorites of all time,” he says.

What about shoes? “Stuart Weitzman’s 2008 collection,” says Wheelock without hesitation. This tasteful fashion sense doesn’t come without a price tag; all costumes and personal expenses are paid for by the artist wearing them.

A BLAST FROM THE PAST

The female impersonator as an art form has been around since ancient Rome. In Elizabethan England, male actors filled female roles because women weren’t allowed on stage. Many Native American tribes had cross-dressing “berdaches,” prophets who saw the world through both the masculine and



LET'S GO TO RIO!

The party takes place Saturday, January 16th in the ballroom of Hotel Zoso, 150 N. Indian Canyon Dr., in downtown Palm Springs. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. and “Carnavale des Originales” begins at 7:30 p.m. Ticket prices include cupcakes and brownies at your reserved tables; premium martini and wine bars available before the show. Details: Ticket prices are \$25–\$65; call Chris at AAP, (760) 325-8481 for information.

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feminine perspectives.

Cross-dressing was also a prominent feature in Japanese Kabuki theater. In recent years, this entertainment genre became part of mainstream media: Who hasn’t seen singer and supermodel RuPaul strut his stuff on television, or laughed with Dame Edna on stage?

We’ve discovered Savannah’s flamboyant Lady Chablis, first in the book, followed by the film, “Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil.” Then there’s John Travolta’s romp in “Hairspray.”

CROSSING OVER

So what’s illusion and what’s real in this over-the-top salute to femininity? Wheelock states it simply: “When I become Aday, I feel empowered and elegant; the femininity is the outlet for me to express what I can’t as a man in our society.” The artistry creates the illusion, but the result is real for Wheelock. “Aday was created as an escape from my life back in the 80s, and has remained a positive outlet these many years. She’s not an illusion so much as a gift of being. The day that Aday is no more will be a tremendous loss to me.”

Lamer/Salem sees it a bit differently. “Salem is a manifestation of all that I find exciting and festive,” he says. “She’s a character that I’ve molded for almost 30 years, and I’ve never tried to portray Salem as feminine. She is a performer whose main goal is to give the audience a good show.” But like an outspoken girlfriend, Lamer can’t resist adding this: “(Salem’s) drop-dead glamorous with an amazing sense of style.”

With some wink-and-nod humor and a whole lot of rhinestones—“One of my gowns has more than 20,000 on it,” says Wheelock—this Vegas-style show makes a great evening out for couples, gay or straight, society matrons and patrons, and everyone in between.

These showgirls may not be the oldest in the world, but they will make us laugh and make us wonder, “Just how do they dance in hair and heels that tall without tipping over?”

In a salute to Broadway, the last notes of the show’s big finale will ebb from the room. We’ll hear the swoosh of beaded dresses and see the retreat of some of the shapeliest and well-groomed gams in showbiz, and it will all be over—until next year.