

Pure heaven in bare feet

Storyed singer proves voice a national treasure

By **DAVID SCHMEICHEL**

The last time she was in town, Canuck chanteuse k.d. lang helped us pay tribute to one of our most hallowed hometown heroes.

But yesterday night, the earthy cowgirl turned torch singer was very much the star of her own show.

Playing to a sold out crowd of 1,500, lang touched on pretty much every aspect of her storied career -- the early alt-country phase, the adult-contempo crossover, and especially her success as one of the most gifted interpreters on record -- all while proving her voice is as much a national treasure as hockey, poutine and beer.

Clad in a classy vest-and-slacks combo (but looking comfy in trademark bare feet, natch), lang chose to wait awhile before hauling out the big guns, opening with the lilting track Upstream, from her new disc Watershed (her first collection of original material since 2000).

In interviews, lang can sometimes come across as something of a cool customer -- her guardedness a likely response to all the handwringing that greeted her pro-gay, anti-meat stance in the early '90s. But on stage, she can also be a bit of a ham, whether mugging impishly through every lyrical double entendre, hanging onto the microphone stand as though her life depended on it, or doing an impromptu version of the swim.

And the voice? Pure heaven -- especially when coupled with acoustics and a speaker system that made it sound like she was crooning directly into our ear all night.

Upstream was a warm-up, but on her cover of Neil Young's Helpless (which lang famously performed at the 2005 Juno Awards here, after Young was sidelined by a brain aneurysm at the last minute) lang went for broke.

Alternating between mournful and ecstatic, lang dragged the choruses out for what seemed like an eternity, wringing so much pathos from the words even Young himself would have been impressed.

But while interpreting has long been one of lang's specialties (a later cover of Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah was rewarded with a late-set standing-O), new tunes like Thread, Coming Home, Once In a While and I Dream of Spring accounted for much of the first half.

She grew even more playful with the light-as-air Some Dreams (from her smoking-themed covers disc Drag), then downright flirty while introducing her five-piece backing band, joking, "I'm slightly perplexed by the fact that at my age, I've taken to surrounding myself with good looking men."

And after a ribald spin through Miss Chatelaine -- a Lawrence Welk-like romp inspired by a rare glamour shot of lang wearing lipstick -- she drew her biggest laughs yet.

"They superimposed lipstick on me, which is just wrong," she quipped. "In fact, that is the moment the term lipstick lesbian was conceived."

All joking aside, lang chose to close the show on a transcendental note, first with the one-two punch of Jane Siberry's The Valley and Cohen's Hallelujah -- a tune it's near impossible to hear without choking up something fierce -- then with her biggest hit Constant Craving.

It was an appropriate choice, given the song -- like the show itself -- left us wanting more.

k.d. lang

Where: Pantages Playhouse

When: Thu., June 5

With: Dustin O'Halloran

Sun Rating: 4 1/2 out of 5 stars



Canuck chanteuse k.d. lang entertains her fans last night at the Pantages Playhouse. JASON HALSTED/SUN MEDIA