

Review: Paul Swan is Dead and Gone at Torn Page

The Civilians resurrect a multi-talented queer raconteur in a Chelsea townhouse for a uniquely intimate experience. Joey Sims reviews.



“Paul Swan is Dead and Gone” at Torn Page (Photo: Maria Baranova)

Paul Swan collapses dramatically to the floor. Struggling to get up, his eyes lock with the nearest human – myself, seated in the first row. His hand reaches out. “Help me!” The audience laughs, as do I. A pause, then Swan reiterates: “No, really. Help me.” Hesitantly I reach out a hand to help – a hand that is, of course, quickly shaken off. Swan rises and carries on with the show, throwing silent shade over his shoulder – maybe at my sentiment, or maybe just at my uselessness.

Throwaway moments of audience participation like this are, perhaps, de rigueur in New York theater by this point. Yet, over the 75 minutes I spent with him, my bond with Paul Swan felt uniquely intimate. It helps that The Civilians are presenting *Paul Swan is Dead*

and Gone at a small, elegant room in a Chelsea townhouse. A select few of us (the space seats 30) are sharing an audience with Swan, a queer multi-talented raconteur who performed weekly from the 1930s through the 1960s. Now Swan is back from the dead, for one last soirée.

That intimacy is also helped by our guide for the evening, Swan's unassuming pianist Bellamy. He greets us at the top of the show, introducing the great artiste (and then vamping adorably when Swan misses his cue). As warmly played by Robert M. Johanson, Bellamy is an endearingly befuddled mess, struggling to keep up as Swan takes over the room. Though he is quieter once Swan arrives—"a good piano player is one who never speaks," the star declares—he remains a grounding presence amidst the madness to follow.

Once Swan arrives, he stumbles dramatically through songs, anecdotes and dances. As the star gives us the best show he can, the intimacy is also helped by Steve Cosson's simple staging. The choreography is basic, at times even a little amateurish. The singing is unpolished, albeit rich with feeling. A couple prop mishaps at my performance (presumably not scripted) only lent to the impromptu vibe. Cosson seeks to give us Swan unfiltered, just as he would have performed in some seedy backroom in the '60s.

The only reason *Paul Swan is Dead and Gone* works at all, of course, is Tony Torn. The son of Rip Torn and Geraldine Page (the show is performed in their former residence, now an event space christened "Torn Page"), Torn is born for the role. His Swan is at home on the stage, filling it with his talent, beauty and desperation. Torn had my audience firmly in the palm of his hand and carries Claire Kiechel's script through an occasional lapse into the saccharine.

That lapse mainly comes at the end, and that's where the show loses a bit of its edge. To bring things to a close, Kiechel shifts focus to a doomed love from Swan's past and it's not an entirely welcome shift. The Swan we've met is someone who only ever pushed forward – never achieving the success or fame he desired, but never letting it get him down. He was "an artist through and through," as Bollany declares.

The risk of concluding on a deeply sentimental note, as Kiechel does, is to overly soften a figure who has seemed made of steel. Swan did not need my hand to help him get up. Does he need my sympathy? And would he have liked being painted as yet another "tragic queer"? I don't know. I certainly wish I could ask him.