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One woman show 'Solo Anna' performed at Staten Island's Cafe Belvedere



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Lidia Vitale starred in "Solo Anna," a one-woman show, at Casa Belvedere, Grymes Hill. (Courtesy of In Scena)

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(<http://connect.silive.com/user/michaelfressola/index.html>) By Michael J. Fressola (<http://connect.silive.com/user/michaelfressola/posts.html>)

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Italian-born actress Lidia Vitale is too beautiful to impersonate completely the splendid wreck that was Anna Magnani (1906-1973), but two minutes into "Solo Anna," her one-woman show, it hardly mattered.

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Vitale can produce the basso profundo voice, the flashing eyes, the eruptions of laughter and tears, the fury, the whole full-bodied package. And if she can't manage Magnani's baggy eyes, famously ringed with dark circles, what of it? No actress ever looked so alluringly sleep-deprived as Anna Magnani.

"Solo Anna," written by Franco D'Alessandro and directed by Eva Minemar, had a one-night stand this week at Cafe Belvedere as the Island stop in "In Scena," a new citywide Italian theater festival.

Notice the usage: Italian, not Italian-American. There's a difference. Parts of the play were in Italian but getting the gist of it wasn't hard for non-speakers. The hospitality, naturally, was lavish. There were finger foods and wine beforehand and coffee and biscotti afterwards.

The evening was an occasion and everyone was nicely dressed, including Vitale's Anna, chic in a black brocade cocktail dress and a fur jacket (right out of "Mad Men.").

"Solo Anna" is a necklace of vivid recollections from the actress's life: Her loveless upbringing in Rome, her career, marriage, motherhood, press conferences, personal manifesto, Hollywood time, friendship with Tennessee Williams, death.

Patting her hips and belly in Magnani's characteristic fashion, Vitale replicated Magnani's comfortable sense of herself. She knew who was, and if it didn't please the public, too bad.

Was she a feminist, she was asked by journalists (who often caused her pain). Not conventionally. Instead, Magnani demanded respect, which meant the same pay her male counterparts received.

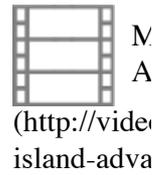
Still, sometimes she got the money and lost the respect. Against her better judgment, she accepted a well-paid role in "The Secret of Santa Victoria," only to be savaged by critics. Late in her career, she complained that Hollywood only offered her roles "in which I'm stirring a big pot of spaghetti."

Part of Magnani's appeal was her intelligence, brought out often in D'Alessandro's script. "I like dogs," she says, "not men who act like dogs." Most men disappointed her, even Tennessee Williams whom she loved (and whose "Rose Tattoo" brought her an Oscar).

At Belvedere, "Solo Anna" was staged in a salon-like room, without a stage or platform. There were clumsy film projections, but the intimate setting made the deeply rooted performance that much more powerful.

In the final scene, Vitale's Magnani is ill and in pain and senses that her exit is approaching: tears streamed down her face, followed by incandescent smile.

The meaning? What else but this: Magnani is gone, but her performances will live forever.



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