



## Kiki Durane

by Gerard Raymond

With the likes of Lauren Bacall, Eartha Kitt, Rosemary Harris, Eileen Heckart and Dame Edna appearing on New York stages recently, year 2000 has turned into celebration of theatrical ladies of a certain age. There's another great performer of the same vintage to add to the list: Kiki Durane, chanteuse extraordinaire, who performs every weekend at Fez, an intimate nightclub in New York's East Village. Miss Durane, who's in her very late sixties ("let's not get too specific," she growls) is accompanied by pianist Herb, her long-time friend and collaborator. While Kiki does all the talking, singing and, yes, dancing, Herb (who has no last name), reinforces the drama and pathos of the evening with his expert musicianship. Kiki & Herb's current cabaret act, *Playing for Time* is a powerful and potentially lethal mix of old songs and new, spiked with reminiscences from Durane's colorful past. The fact that the sexagenarian duo unleash so much energy on stage has fuelled a popular rumor that Kiki & Herb are actually the fictional creations of pair of much younger men Justin Bond and Kenny Mellman. But that's getting too specific. A few weeks ago, Kiki Durane graciously invited Broadway.com into her somewhat cramped dressing room at Fez. Have no doubts -- you are in the presence of a showbiz trouper and a theatrical lady of unique distinction.



**I understand you and Herb have recently returned from an engagement in Europe.** Yes we played in Braunau, which happens to be the birthplace of Hitler. We hadn't been to Europe since 1967. There were many offers before this, but we just didn't quite manage to get back.

**In *Playing for Time*, you recreate a crucial moment from your previous European tour, when you sang at the Grand Casino in Monte Carlo. Tell us about it.** I was life-long friends with Princess Grace D'Monaco. When I met her, of course, she was still Grace Kelly. She was a young actress and I was a young singer and we hung around a lot together. She's got a sort of a saintly image at this point, but back then she was a lot of fun--full of piss and vinegar, as they used to say. Then I married--she didn't like my husband--and I didn't see her. But after my divorce in 1964 I wrote her a letter. She was not only a friend, she was also a fan so she invited us over. I took my daughter Coco with me and we were doing pretty well and having a good time, meeting a lot of interesting people. Then Coco died in an accident.

Now where are my cigarettes? I have to smoke. I can't just sit here and not have anything to do with my hands. Hold on, dear, for a second. (*She lights cigarette*). My daughter fell off a yacht and drowned. It belonged to his fellow I was dating at the time. He was pretty well known in espionage circles, so, of course, he was trying to lead a very discreet life. It caused quite a scandal. Gracie had to distance herself from it and the best thing for me to do was to leave. I just couldn't sing after that.

**Let's go back to when you first met Herb. I understand you were both children at the time.** I was about four years old. It was the Depression and things were pretty tough for my mother. I guess I was a bit precocious. Anyway, my mother had to get rid of me. She sent me to an institutional, a children's home outside of Erie, Pennsylvania, not too far from where I was born. And that's where I met Herb. He was about my age and, poor thing, he didn't know who his people were. We took a liking to one another because

we liked music. He was a little scared of me at first and it took me a while to win him around, but I protected him from other kids who would pick on him and stuff.

**When did you begin your professional careers together?** In 1946 I went to Baltimore. I birthed my son Bradford there and I got a job as a dancer at Shagansky's Burlesque and Juke Joint. But I didn't like being away from Herb, so a short time later I convinced Mr. Shagansky to let me sing and to bring Herb in. Herb is terrific. He's a sort of a musical dictionary. If you want Kiki you get Herb. It's part of the deal.

**In *Playing for Time* you perform a number which you say got you and Herb out of Baltimore. Did they send you out of town?** No one sends me out of anywhere, sweetheart. I left. Well, we were encouraged to leave. Mr. Shagansky thought it was okay but when we started playing at the Blue Light and some of the more classier joints, they didn't like it too much. It was the time that the House of Un-American Activities was clamping down on intellectual expression and I felt I needed to react to that. But they didn't want singing strippers who were out there sounding off. They didn't even want naked women Communists. Just a minute, I've got to have a little wine, it helps me relax, so I don't get too keyed up. (*She pours herself a glass.*)

**Did you do any work on Broadway?** I was the understudy for Lena Horne in *Jamaica*. In fact, I understudied a number of parts but I never went on. One time I was supposed to go on but I hadn't gone on for so long that I wasn't even at the theater. I got fired. But to tell you the truth I didn't like the hours. You know, if you have to rehearse for a Broadway show you have to be up pretty early in the day for that kind of thing. I was more suited to doing nightclub work.

**Did you do any Shakespeare? You perform a famous speech in your show.** It's from *Richard II*. I was told one time by Orson Welles that I should try reading a little Shakespeare. I read *Romeo and Juliet*, but I felt, you know, I wasn't quite the right type for Juliet. But then I read that story about poor Richard II who was just trying and trying and everyone was trying to take it all away from him because, I guess, he was more of a personal type than a kingly type. That's a little bit how I feel sometimes. Everyone is always trying to bring you down.

**How about movies? Did you consider a Hollywood career?** I danced in some Elvis pictures and after my divorce, I was in a few motorcycle pictures as well. But I really didn't like the movies all that much. They said my voice didn't translate well to the screen. Later on, there was talk of a part in *The Eyes of Laura Mars*. But again it was my voice. I was supposed to sing the theme song but Barbra decided to do it herself.

**You did make a few records though, didn't you?** In 1958 we released *The Hazy Days of Kiki* and in 1967 we recorded our comeback album *Kiki and Herb: It's not Unusual*. I recorded "Windmills Of Your Mind" for that album. Gracie loved that song, she really did. That's why we performed it at the Grand Casino. But we didn't get to tour and promote the album because Coco died.

**Did you know that Sandra Bernhard sang the same song in her recent show at Joe's Pub?** I find that fascinating. She reminds me of myself. There's probably a lot we have in common. She's a single mother and I know she is a people person. She's one of those gals who swings both ways. She's a kind of free spirit who likes to take life and live it. I certainly was that type of girl.

**To get back to your records, tell us about the spoken-word album from which you perform a piece in your show.** It's called *Kiki and Herb: Whiteys on the Moon*. I was involved with Dick Gregory, a very pro-active Black gentleman who was running for the Presidency, and I got involved in racial causes. I found this poem by Gil Scott-Heron, who was mostly known for "The Revolution will not be televised." The poem I perform, "Whitey on the Moon" appeals to me because it was a perfect example of the hypocrisy of our government. They were not going to send a Black man to the moon. Our leaders had to show who had the biggest penis, as it were, at the expense of the common man.

**You mentioned being a single mother. I understand you had another child after your daughter Coco died.** I had my daughter, Miss D, when I was in my 50s. It was a surprise, but it was worth it, of course. She's my great hope for the future. Her foster family doesn't want her to contact me because they think I disturb her. But a mother doesn't disturb her child. They think I can't give her the life she deserves. But

I'm telling you I can give her very rich life. A life that's much more colorful and full of various intrigues and mysteries. But I just don't like people telling me what to do. I mean, I was in a government facility, regimentalized for years when I was a child, so when I got out, I swore nobody was ever going to own me again. I made a mistake when I got married, but I will never make it again. That's why my daughter respects me even though she is not with me.

**There's always a young audience at your shows. What do you think attracts them?** I've always tried to keep up with the times. I watch a lot of television. My daughter who is seventeen is always sending me little tapes and songs she likes. To tell you the truth, as I get older, this rock and roll is more suited me. When I was young I had a sweet kind of high alto voice, now it's more basso profundo. But you know, I feel that these people that come to the show, they are like my children, they really are. I get up there and I sing for them and maybe I give them some sort of perspective that they've never had before. Like I said in my show last year at Christmastime, I think it was, I don't tell people what to think, I tell people what I think. And if they can feel they've had a nice evening or if they feel, ah that old broad's got a point. That's the most I can ask for – a point.

**When you perform you seem to have the energy of someone 40 years younger.** Well I don't know about that. When they tell me break a leg, they make me goddamn nervous, because with the brittle dryness of my bones I could snap in two in any moment. I try to have Kahlua and Cream, Baileys or something with milk in it every now and then just to get a little calcium.

**You've been performing in New York weekly for the past four years. What keeps you going?** I don't know what else I could do. I've gotta eat. If someone came up and handed me a million dollars and a nice condo in Jacksonville, maybe I'd stop. Or maybe one of these days my mind will just go so far that I won't know where the hell I am. I can sit in a chair somewhere and drool while I sing "Flamingo" one more time and have some stout young woman come and give me my pill. If that happens I'd welcome it. But in the meantime I'll just keep going on singing. That's my motto. In spite of everything, I sing.

© 2000 Broadway.com, Inc. (Broadway.com is a division of Hollywood.com)