

“Tenderly” tells story of Rosemary Clooney with songs you will remember

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By Camille Bounds Published online on May 7, 2018



“Tenderly” is the first musical of Gilroy’s Limelight’s 2018 season. It tells the little-known poignant life story of Rosemary Clooney.

It is written by Janet Yates Vogt and Mark Friedman, produced by Kevin Heath and Alan Obata, and directed by the talented Diane Milo, (Always-Patsy Cline), who also marvelously plays Rosemary from her neglected, destitute childhood to her final return to stage and screen after a rollercoaster ride at life. Milo’s voice carries throughout the performance with a fine resonance. All Clooney’s songs are threaded

through the production from her “Come On A My House,” “Botch-a Me,” Mambo Italiano,” Tenderly,” “Count Your Blessings,” “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” and “Straighten Up And Fly Right” just to name a few.

Clooney had two rocky marriages to actor Jose Ferrer, with whom she had five children and struggled to maintain mental stability throughout her life. Liquor and pills finally took her stardom for about eight years when she was invited to perform by her good friend Bing Crosby in his “50th Anniversary Special” and be in the movie “White Christmas.” She then maintained her stability until her death from lung cancer in 2002. (She was George Clooney’s aunt.)

Michael Hirsch as Dr. Victor Monke, her psychiatrist, also plays all the other characters from her mother to Jose Ferrer to Bing Crosby. He gives an outstanding performance and adds a chemistry to all his characters that makes each one believable.

Michael Johnson’s piano with added bass and drums gives a solid musical back up, with Minna Rogers interesting subtle choreography. They tie the show together for an entertaining evening. As Limelight always does, this is a well-done production.

South Valley

Mambo Italiano with Rosemary

Limelight theater's 'Tenderly' is a delight

by Susan Rife

<https://southvalley.com/mambo-italiano-with-rosemary/>



REMINISCE Diane Milo with Michael Hirsch in 'Tenderly, The Rosemary Clooney Musical' at Limelight Actors Theater in Gilroy. Photo: Alan Obata

Many people today may know Rosemary Clooney as much for her famous actor nephew, George Clooney, as for her career as a singer and actress who was contemporaries with Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. Her pop success with such tunes as "Come On-a My House," "Sisters" (from the movie "White Christmas") and "Mambo Italiano" in the 1950s and '60s seems like a distant memory now.

Tenderly: The Rosemary Clooney Story, now on stage at Limelight Actors Theater, aims to expand on that slim knowledge with a deeper dive into her life and work. Directed by and starring Diane Milo in the title role, the musical showcases 18 songs from the Clooney songbook as the singer reflects on her life through a series of conversations with her Beverly Hills psychiatrist, Victor Monke, well-played by Michael Hirsch.

The show opens with Clooney in a glittering evening gown and long gloves onstage in Reno, where years of addiction to pills coupled with the recent assassination of her good friend Robert F. Kennedy led to an onstage nervous breakdown. Her involuntary hospitalization leads her to prickly meetings with Monke, who teases from her the lows, and highs, of her life.

Among the highs were her collaborations with Crosby and others and her success as a jazz and pop vocalist. The lows started early with the abandonment of her and her sister by their mother when she was quite young, two tumultuous marriages to Jose Ferrer, with whom she had five children (the first four in a three and a half year span), her addiction to pills and her public breakdown. She had sung at the Ambassador

Hotel the night of RFK's assassination and was close enough to hear the gunshots that took his life; she was devastated by his death.

Her early meetings with Monke aren't especially fruitful, but she warms to his easy ear and over the years of their sessions, grows into a true friendship.

Milo really shines as a singer; she has a lovely timbre to her voice and thoroughly owns the role. From the opening "Hey There" through "Straighten Up and Fly Right" and "Mambo Italiano" to "This Ole House," she has the audience in the palm of her hand.

Hirsch is a delight as her foil, acting not simply as her shrink but in roles from her priest to her sister Betty to Sinatra to Crosby to Clooney's husband Jose Ferrer), seamlessly shifting vocal inflections and sometimes changing (literal) hats to convey who's sharing the stage. Their two voices meld beautifully on duets whether Hirsch is singing a female or male role.

An onstage three-piece band, led by musical director Michael Johnson on piano, Greg Goebel on bass and Dave Matthews on percussion, adds richness to every song.

'Tenderly: The Rosemary Clooney Musical.' By Janet Yates Vogt and Mark Friedman. *Limelight Actors Theater. Through May 19 at Gilroy Center for the Arts, 7341 Monterey St., Gilroy. Tickets \$25, seniors \$22, \$30 Mother's Day matinee special. 408.472.3292, limelightactorstheater.com.*

South Valley

Come on-a My House

Sway with Rosemary Clooney at the Limelight

by Susan Rife

<https://southvalley.com/come-on-a-my-house/>



SONGSTRESS Diane Milo opposite Michael Hirsch in 'Tenderly, The Rosemary Clooney Musical.' Opens April 27 at Limelight Actors Theater in Gilroy. Credit: Alan Obata

Tenderly, The Rosemary Clooney Musical, opening April 27 at Limelight Actors Theater, is more than simply a jukebox musical with an actress running through the Clooney songbook.

Instead, the musical, written by Janet Yates Vogt and Mark Friedman, takes a deeper look at the life of the legendary cabaret singer and actress.

"It's not all about the bright stuff. It dives into her life, her breakdown and her eventual turnaround to come back on top," said Kevin Heath, Limelight co-founder and producer. "It's a real story with dark moments."

Clooney was born into poverty in Kentucky in 1928. By the time of her death in 2002, her career had run parallel to that of other pop crooners from the middle of the 20th century, but was clouded by her mother's abandonment of her at an early age, the disappearance of her father when she was a teenager, a rocky marriage to Jose Ferrer, the assassination of close friend Robert F. Kennedy, a nervous breakdown and drug addiction.

The Limelight production will be star Diane Milo as Clooney and Michael Hirsch as her psychiatrist (and a host of other roles). Songs come into the plot as Clooney revisits key memories of her life.

Heath said Limelight's creative team saw an earlier version of *Tenderly* after Limelight had done "Always...Patsy Cline" (which also starred Milo).

"We learned so much about Rosemary that we started researching her life," said Heath. "She worked with famous icons like Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra, but her personal life was almost more famous."

Clooney was standing just yards away from Bobby Kennedy when he was shot. After a public breakdown and years of therapy, she made a comeback when Crosby invited her to join him for a 50th anniversary concert.

Tenderly covers her life from the late '50s to the '80s, providing some challenges to the Limelight crew.

"One of the biggest issues is keeping true to the period with costumes and set pieces," said Heath. "Fortunately, our musical director, Michael Johnson, is also our costumer. He will create several original pieces for the show, as he did with the Patsy show. We are also having custom wigs made to fit each period. The set pieces are minimal, and all Mid Century, one of my favorite styles."

Heath has put a three-piece live band—piano, drums and bass guitar—right on the stage to make the performance scenes more real.

"At first, I was nervous about having a drummer, to be honest. But after hearing the music, I realized the music of the period used very soft brushes on the drums, versus a hard-core pounding," said Heath.

Milo has done extensive theater work in the Bay Area, after getting her start in Pittsburgh, Penn. in the 1970s. She directed Limelight's 2018 Cabaret Series and will direct the next show, *The Last 5 Years* before retiring from her day job and returning to Pennsylvania. She also directed her co-star Hirsch in *The Bridges of Madison County*.

"Both are exceptional performers and dancers with incredible voices," said Heath.

'Tenderly, The Rosemary Clooney Musical.' Limelight Actors Theater, April 27-May 19. Visit limelightactorstheater.com.