

Cabaret At The Colony The Royal Treatment

By Lynn DiMenna



N

ine years ago, when the owners of The Colony in Palm Beach, Florida, were convinced to use a conveniently located storage room and convert it into a supper club/cabaret room with all the accoutrements of a first class entertainment venue, there were plenty of skeptics.

"We had a lot of people who wondered whether it could ever work and who thought I was taking a big chance," said Rob Russell, the entertainment director of what became The Royal Room at The Colony Hotel, "but I am a very determined person and I knew

we could make it happen!"

The tall, handsome, impeccably dressed Mr. Russell, who, I might add, is an extremely talented performer in his own right, credits his family for raising him with the belief that he could accomplish anything he set his mind to. "I grew up listening to the songs from the Great American Songbook and my parents were great fans of all its interpreters: Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, etc.," explained Russell, "and since I performed myself at a young age and was well received...I was hooked!"

A swimmer in high school, he continued to pursue his interest in theater at SUNY Fredonia

and he appeared in numerous theatrical productions. His father wisely insisted he earn a business degree to have something to fall back on in the event his musical theater aspirations didn't materialize. That decision gave Russell an advantage when, after numerous years of "paying his dues" with other related jobs, he was offered the challenge of creating a venue from scratch.

"It's a total team effort," Russell acknowledged, "and I'm fortunate in that everyone here is supportive of the same goals." Hotel manager Roger Everingham, a huge cabaret and music fan himself, the owners and the staff of the hotel as well as the Royal Room's

wait staff and crew are all equally committed to providing loyal patrons, and those new to the supper club/cabaret experience, an evening of top headliner entertainment, exquisite food and superior service in a warm, gracious and intimate ambience.

Russell elaborated, "You can have a beautiful place but if you don't have great service, guess what, you have an empty place! I personally know at least fifty percent of our audience, sometimes more, and my staff and I know what drinks they drink, wines they prefer and foods

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they like and we keep track of all of that."

Marilyn Maye, who returned for her third season this year, loves performing in the room for that very reason. "It's a very fitting title because everyone there is treated like royalty!" Bass player Steve Doyle, who has also appeared there many times adds, "Russ is so important to The Royal Room experience because

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he facilitates the party and provides a sense of community for both the P.B.ers [Palm Beachers] and the performers."

It should come as no surprise that The Colony Hotel offers such an amenity to their clientele. It has been serving royals and dignitaries, from the former King Edward of England and Wallace Simpson to ex-Presidents Bush and Clinton, since 1947. Discriminating international travelers and "snowbirds" from the northeast and west keep returning to its ideal location with its proximity to the high-end galleries and shops and its plethora of first class restaurants. Nestled like a jewel in the heart of downtown Palm Beach, the hotel recently won the prestigious 2009 Providencia Award for its extraordinary contribution to the vitality and

prosperity of Palm Beach County as a major tourism destination.

Together Everingham and Russell listen to and select all of The Royal Room performers. Russell stated, "From January to April, the high season, you need performers with name recognition to sell the tickets. It's the Mary Wilsons, Diahann Carrolls, Michele Lees, Ann Hampton Callaways and John Pizzarellis who have done very well for us." As a theater buff, he's also likely to present Tony Award winners like Faith Prince, James Naughton and Christine Ebersole.

Russell's passion for the performers who appear on the custom built, beautifully curved and draped stage, is palpable. "Many of these talented people have become my great friends, we travel together and I often go to New York to see them perform there." He also credits Donald Smith for introducing him to many of the up-and-coming stars each fall when he's in town for The Mabel Mercer Cabaret Convention. Many of them, like Tony DeSare, wind up performing in the room's *Summer Series*.

In addition to the cabaret, they've instituted a *Motown Dance* night with music by Memory Lane who auditioned on the terrace with nothing but a boom box for accompaniment. In a few short weeks, the word was out, the dance floor filled up and they've been there every Friday night for five years.

As far as his own singing opportunities are concerned, Russell has already appeared doing duets with many of the performers over the years. Recently, both Ann Hampton Callaway and Steve Tyrell served as his backup singers for an evening at the newly instituted *Rob Russell's Cast Party* and he's presently in the studio recording an album of his own. "I may just be shocking a few people with a show of my own down the road."

What else is coming down the road for The Royal Room? Well, according to Russell, he fulfilled a dream when the Broadway royal Faith "Prince" returned in April to record a live CD, and an exciting 2011 season is already set. There's only one thing left to say... long live The Royal Room! ○

Editor's Note:

For the full summer schedule, check our listings and visit www.thecolonypalmbeach.com