

Gypsy moves onto another stage – retirement

By Denise Sloan Smart

STATELINE – For more years than many of us have been alive, James Haake has been basking in the glow of stage lights, then movie lights, then TV camera lights and back to stage lights.

Tonight, when the lights go dark on “Carnival Cabaret” at the Horizon Casino Resort, Haake – who is just as well known as Gypsy – will call it quits.



James "Gypsy"
Haake

The 78-year-old Gypsy is retiring after 59 years in show business.



James "Gypsy"
Haake

“I’ve talked about retiring before, but now it’s really time,” Haake said after the Dec. 27 show.

“I’ve loved performing so much and have had a wonderful career, but I’m really looking forward to spending time with friends and family.”

Haake “- pronounced Hawk “- began his career nearly six decades ago as a dancer on Broadway. His first job was working along side a very young, pre-“Brady Bunch” Florence Henderson in a musical titled “Wish You Were Here,” which starred Jack Cassidy.

Moving from Broadway to the cabaret, Gypsy was the original host of the first “La Cage Aux Folles” show, which took the country’s rich and famous by storm. It was in Beverly Hills on stage in an upscale cabaret 30 years ago that Mel Brooks “discovered” Gypsy and his movie and TV careers were born.

“It was like being an instant celebrity once Mel Brooks takes you by the arm,” Haake said in an earlier interview. “And I had such a blast working with Mel and Ann Bancroft.”

Brooks cast Gypsy in his classic film “To Be Or Not To Be,” starring himself and his real-life wife, Bancroft.

Gypsy went on to co-star with Jane Fonda in “The Morning After;” with Shelly Long in “Troop Beverly Hills;” and in the movie “Clifford.”

His TV roles included characters on “Matlock” and “Dynasty” and his recurring role as Uncle Otto on “Married With Children,” which is still in reruns.

On a cabaret stage, in front of a live audience is where Gypsy’s star has shined the longest and the brightest. Between his wry sense of humor, his gorgeous legs, his stunning designer wardrobe and his hilarious banter with the crowd, Gypsy is as much at home on stage as an emcee, as he’ll ever be lounging in a recliner in retirement.

Gypsy, lounging in a recliner? Never! Heâ€™ll be out there somewhere, entertaining someone and making every one laugh. Just as he did last Sunday evening.

Gypsy sauntered on stage wearing a sexy one-shoulder siren-red gown with black stockings and black designer stilettos. A gentleman in the front row â€œeyedâ€ him a little too long.

â€œGet over me man! I ainâ€™t a real chick,â€ Gypsy belted out in a deep Bronx accent.

His banter with the audience is part history lesson, part jokes and part insults. When the audience members donâ€™t â€œgetâ€ the insults, itâ€™s all the funnier.

His self-deprecating humor is peppered throughout the show while three beautiful women â€“- who are also really men â€“- impersonate the likes of Barbra Streisand, Dolly Parton, Reba McIntyre, Bette Midler and Beyonce.

Gypsy claims his â€œgown is by Bob Mackie. Face by Forest Lawn.â€ The crowd roared.

Under the talented production and direction of Dan Gore, â€œCarnival Cabaretâ€ opened at the Horizon in February 2000. This reporter and Gypsy became friends that same month.

â€œCarnival Cabaretâ€ is the longest running cabaret show in the South Shoreâ€™s history. For Gore and the rest of the cast, the show will go on and itâ€™ll still be good, but theyâ€™ll never find another Gypsy to emcee. When we say â€œGypsy leaves big shoes to fill,â€ weâ€™re not just talking about the size 13 stilettos.

Denise Sloan Smart has been covering entertainment at Lake Tahoe since the 1970s. She remains friends with many of the performers she interviewed over the decades.