

Resorts bets on Tony Pace as A.C.'s first signature star

By CHUCK DARROW
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Among the many things that Las Vegas has and Atlantic City doesn't is its own homegrown superstar attraction like master impressionist Danny Gans, who has achieved superstar status without hardly ever leaving the Strip.

But Resorts Atlantic City entertainment chief Rick Gallagher believes that will change once word gets out about Tony Pace, who is booked through the summer at the casino's intimate Screening Room theater. Gallagher is so convinced the New Hampshire-bred entertainer is destined to become AyCee's first signature star, he has booked him for an unprecedented residency.

So, is Gallagher, one of the industry's more astute talent evaluators, on the mark? Judging from a recent performance, he may very well be. Pace, who bills himself as "The Man With The Voice - who just happens to be funny," has a lot going for him, including impressive versatility, a keen comic mind and the energy and likability crucial to the success Gallagher has projected for him.

The best way to describe Pace, who looks like the love child of Tom Poston and Dennis Hopper, is that he is a one-man variety show. He opened a recent performance with a solid rendition of "Cara Mia," which instantly established his vocal credentials - especially on a couple of notes he held for a surprisingly long time.

But he added a large dollop of comedy to the segment by playfully teasing a man in the front row about the patron's lack of rhythm.

From there, Pace showed off his considerable gift of mimicry with a spot-on singing impression of Louis Armstrong. True, doing Satchmo is straight out of Impersonations 101. But his was one of the best takes on the legendary jazz man we've yet seen.

From there, Pace hopped between straight vocalizing, impressions, wonderfully silly bits with audience members and wise guy one-liners that scored far more often than not. Among his standout routines were impersonations of Michael Jackson, Johnny Mathis and the odd-couple duet, "To All the Girls I Loved Before" by Willie Nelson and Julio Iglesias.

And before you suggest these are all rather tired subjects, Pace apparently tailors his performances to specific audiences. On this day, the show was overwhelmingly attended by seniors, hence the mostly vintage roster of performers - although he climaxed the set with a hilarious take on American Idol reject William Hung and his logic-defying success with "She Bangs."

Through the end of May, Pace will be performing just three matinees a week. June 30, he takes over the Screening Room's five-night-a-week shift which, hopefully, will allow him to put a little more edge in his show.

In the meantime, there's no reason you shouldn't check him out now, and again in a few weeks or so: He boasts he never performs the same show twice.

While it's still too early to confirm Gallagher's prediction will prove correct, it certainly wouldn't be surprising - nor undeserved - if Pace does indeed become Atlantic City's answer to Danny Gans.