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Seinfeld shows he's still the big deal

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By Seth Kabala, correspondent@qconline.com

Jerry Seinfeld isn't very funny.

Hold the firing squad. My opening sentence was appropriate for the early scenes of the 2002 documentary "Comedian," in which he scrapped his TV repertoire in favor of new material and returned to his roots, braving the bright lights and lonely microphones of the standup circuit.

Time and persistence, however, have converted that incandescent halo to a where-are-my-shades? LED beacon that was shining in full brilliance when the 56-year-old comedian brought his act to the Adler Theatre in Davenport on Friday night for the third time since 2005.

Opening the show after a half-hour delay was Mark Schiff, who seemed angry with a lot of things. But his irritation received consistent laughs during his 30-minute set, causing a woman behind me to laugh so hard she sounded as though she needed an inhaler.

And if Mr. Schiff got a respectable reception, the near-capacity crowd drew from energy reserves when Mr. Seinfeld burst onstage. Donning a suit and tie, he struck a pose, arms outstretched -- trademark wide eyes no extra charge -- and launched full-throttle into his set.

A sampling:

On restaurant specials: "If they're so special, put them on the menu."

On ratings systems: "'Sucks' and 'Great' are the only two ratings people use any more. If you're walking down the street and your ice cream falls on the ground, what do you say? 'Sucks. (Then) (w)hat do you say? Great!'"

On Five-Hour Energy: "That is a weird amount of time. Who's working 1 to 6?"

On having three kids all under the age of 10: "It's like having a blender, but you don't have the top for it. You can use it, but there's always a mess."

Bit after bit, Seinfeld killed on everything, frequently launching into his classic cracked-and-screamed falsetto when delivering a punchline. There was an awkward pause once when he transitioned between topics, but that was the only noticeable break in laughter during the 40 minutes of his set I was able to stay for in order to meet my deadline.

Remember the needing-inhaler woman? During Mr. Seinfeld's set, I considered turning around to see if someone was strangling her.

When in the presence of greatness, what can be said that doesn't sound trite? Here's my attempt:

I got to see arguably the greatest stand-up talent of this generation.

No, let's trash that "talent" word. It gives a false sense of accomplishment. From the trenches of comedy clubs in 2002 to the machine-hitting-on-all-cylinders I saw Friday night, there's only one award I can think of that Mr. Seinfeld deserves for his eight years of re-dues-paying:

Most Improved.