

## **Cabaret Students Find Their Light**

by *Alexander C. Kafka*

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As a girl on Staten Island, Maria Ottavia fell under the spell of Judy and Ella and Barbra. She wanted to invite Judy to her 7<sup>th</sup> birthday party, and her mom didn't know how to break it to her that Garland was dead.

Ms. Ottavia, 41, grew up shy, "a closet singer," who taught herself guitar, banjo, and piano. In her 20s, at a friend's urging, she enrolled in a Manhattan cabaret workshop taught by the singer-songwriter Lina Koutrakos that she'd seen advertised in *Backstage*. Soon, singing consumed her – not just the cabaret open-mike nights, but also work as a cantor at Roman Catholic churches in New York and New Jersey. She took acting classes at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and, on top of office day jobs, started her own little record label, Mockinbird Records. (the "g" was inadvertently left off the paperwork when she registered the name. It's OK, she says – "it sounds kind of jazzy.")

Now, Ms. Ottavia, dressed in a sharp white pantsuit, is appearing on a nearly empty stage at the intensive, weeklong Cabaret Conference at Yale University, in front of 35 fellow students and 15 faculty members in the New Theater. Accompanied on piano by one of the musical directors, Rick Jensen, she sings the Garland standard "Come Rain or Come Shine" in a fragile, impressionistic version she commissioned from the arranger Christopher Marlowe.

During the frank critique session immediately afterwards, Alex Rybeck, another musical director on the faculty, says he finds Ms. Ottavia's take somewhat whiny. Erv Raible, the conference's director, also feared, he says, that she was "going slightly victimy on me." Ms. Koutrakos and the cabaret legend Julie Wilson strongly disagree.

The next day, sitting by the vending machines in a dormitory basement, Ms. Ottavia explains that she commissioned Mr. Marlowe's arrangement of the Harold Arlen-Johnny Mercer classic about five years ago on the heels of "a very hurtful, abusive relationship." She wanted to set aside bitterness, and sought a gentle arrangement that would express "the longing for someone I could envision being part of my life."

Say "cabaret," Mr. Raible says with a sigh, and some people think of Nazis, and stripping. Or they think within the confines of the Great American Songbook from 1920 to 1950: tunes by Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, and the like.

But cabaret is, he says, "the acting of a song. That's the bottom line." And repertoire at the conference sweeps from Weill to Elvis, Gershwin to the Dixie Chicks. "Right now somebody somewhere is finishing a Great American Songbook song," says Mr. Raible, 59, who grew up loving the rock 'n' roll of the Cincinnati chili parlors and has thin patience for tired showbiz patter and nostalgia.

How simple. A mike. A stool. A piano.

But what songs? In what arrangements? In what order? Sung how? Sung why? Sung why by you? What about musical direction? Stage direction? What are you after in costume, lighting, sound, hair, and makeup? Should your act have a theme? An overall mood and rhythm?

Mr. Rybeck quotes the actress Sylvia Miles as saying cabaret is not unlike a love affair. And don't affairs benefit not just from experience and, let's face it, technique, but also from a strong sense of who you are and what you long for?

A mike. A stool. A piano. How complicated.

A former New York club owner and booker, Mr. Raible has been a Cabaret caliph since the 70s. He brought his conference to Yale three years ago from its former home at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Conn. Mr. Raible's conference rents space from the Yale School of Drama during the campus's slow summer months.

"I think it's one of the more prestigious things that ever happened to cabaret, the fact that we're been accepted at that level," says Mr. Raible. "It can be the ugly stepchild frequently, but at the same time it can be one of the most difficult genres in the whole entertainment field."

James Bundy, the drama school's dean, who met Mr. Raible when Mr. Bundy's wife, the singer Ann Tofflemire, attended the conference in Waterford in 1991, calls the program "consonant with our core work." He also likes that it provides summer programming for New Haven in synch with Yale's own student cabaret performances.

Concerts by conference faculty members showcase the spotlight-wattage talents of – to cite a woefully arbitrary sampling – the 80-year-old Ms. Wilson, whose career dates back to USO shows of the 1940s ("What's here to thrill ya," she growls at the adoring New Haven crowd, "ain't memorabilia"); George Hall, a director, actor, composer, and voice coach who has worked with Laurence Olivier, Leslie Caron, and Vanessa Redgrave; Laurel Massé, a silky-voiced founding member of the Manhattan Transfer; Carol Hall, composer and lyricist of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*; and Sharon McNight, the astonishing character singer known for, among other things, her Sybil-like rendition of *The Wizard of Oz*, in which she channels, with supernatural precision, Dorothy, Good and Wicked Witches, assorted Munchkins, et al.

The students – who had to audition for the conference in the United States, Canada, and England – vary vastly in experience and age, from 20s to 60s, and offer valuable support to each other with their generous applause,



Valerie Cutko performs at Yale's Cabaret Conference.

empathy, and tips on music and stagecraft. Beyond the group sessions, their individual acts are dissected more surgically by trios of faculty experts in classrooms dotting the Yale campus. Students also attend seminars like Mr. Hall's on English music-hall theater, where he memorably posits that stardom is "the ability to be both huge and tiny simultaneously."

Thomas Honeck instructs them on how to work with a technical director. "Find your light, guys," he says. "If you can't see, you're in your light ... Anyone who wants to be a performer should be gene-spliced with a moth."

The music directors Mr. Jensen, Mr. Rybeck, Tex Arnold, Michael Orland, and Paul Trueblood discuss choosing and arranging material. The computer Deep Blue may have beat Garry Kasparov at chess, but has the mainframe yet been invented that can eye a stack of sheet music for 30 seconds, transpose it on a dime, navigate the idiosyncratic phrasing and pauses of a nerve-racked performer, and cue her back to a tongue-twisted verse if she loses her place?

These guys can.

Many of the students are constructing their own shows. Larry Lazzaro, 42 of Palm Springs, Calif., is a theater producer and former Oberlin opera student who gravitates toward crooner material. "I grew up listening to my grandmother in bars. She sang Sophie Tucker-type songs," he says. He's mulling a show of numbers made famous by Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, Frank Sinatra, Rudy Vallee, and other stars who spent time in Palm Springs. Amy Alvarez, a 37-year-old forensic social worker in New Orleans, has performed in musicals for decades but wants to refine her cabaret work for an act at Le Chat Noir. The American-born Valerie Cutko, 42, has a successful stage career in London's West End but is developing her skills for more-intimate cabaret projects like a musical take on "departures, journeys, and arrivals."

For many of the students, the appeal of cabaret seems to boil down to control – control over their stage personae, their repertoires, and their schedules. "You bring to it who and what you are, and you do it at your own pace and your own level," says Barbara Lynn Pedersen, 39, a trust and estate lawyer from Astoria, N.Y.

"I can be me instead of hiding behind a character," says Theresa Tova, 50, of Toronto, a professional singer and actress whose cabaret acts blend Yiddish songs and jazz standards.

Natasha O. Ramer, a petite 60-year-old with more than a faint Piaf vibe, left her life as a theater director in Moscow but, despite her limited English, reclaimed the stage with her Russian cabaret act in New Orleans.

Ms. Ottavia says cabaret "helped me get the strength and the courage to move forward with my life and do the things that I love."

Working with Ms. Koutrakos has brought her a long way from “singing in big glasses and a big evening gown at the Village Gate and making a fool out of myself,” she says. And the conference is the next step in honing a show she has scheduled for mid-September at the Duplex. Selections will include “Someday My Prince Will Come,” “Getting Married Today,” and “Embraceable You.” The evening, she says, is “about being single and being happy about being single. It’s a show about evolving.” It’s called *Just Getting Started*.

“You’re always getting started,” she explains. Though “not expecting to be a big Broadway star,” she says that, through cabaret, “I feel like I’m reliving these dreams I had as a little girl.”