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The Cultural Tourist

by *Howard Kissel*

OCTOBER 8, 2007 11:30 AM

NO COMMENTS

Sam Davis at Birdland »

BY HOWARD KISSEL

About a year and a half ago I was asked to emcee an evening of “new” theater composers at the New-York Historical Society.

Some of the “new” composers on the list had been in the public eye for nearly 30 years. Several were writers who I felt were excellent when you heard their work in the ASCAP or BMI workshops, but they were still not truly ready for “prime time.”

The evening itself was a benefit for the American Musicals Project, a brilliant program that uses musical theater to teach high school kids American history. (“Fiorello” guides them into studying the labor movement, “Paint Your Wagon” the Gold Rush, etc.)

Whoever selected the material did an excellent job because I found myself warming to composers I had hitherto not cared for.

But I was puzzled by the last two songs on the cd I had been sent to help me prepare my remarks. Listening to them, I thought there must be some mistake — these sounded like songs by Vernon Duke, who was hardly a “new” composer. They were in fact written by the evening’s music director, Sam Davis. Sunday night Davis presented an hour of his music at Birdland as part of its Sunday and Monday evening Broadway series hosted by impresario Jim Caruso. (Tonight the series presents Broadway hooper Jeffrey Denman.)

Davis, who is currently conducting “Curtains” on Broadway, is an extraordinarily versatile composer. The pieces I heard last year (one solo, one breathtaking ensemble number) showed him at his most intimate and lyrical — which is why I was reminded of Duke.

Last night’s program, with Davis at Birdland’s Boesendorfer, showed him as a vibrant theater composer — highly charged, funny, often bizarre. (One of his shows is a musical version of Shakespeare’s Scottish Play. An excerpt, with a witty Mark Waldrop lyric, “A Kilt is Not a Dress” was sung with huge gusto by Will Swenson and Patrick Sullivan.)

As the above example suggests, Davis has been drawn to very odd subject matter for his scores, which may account for why his brilliant material is not better known.

I found myself more attracted to the quiet songs, several of which had lyrics by Sean Hartley. “Old Blue Sweater,” wittingly sung by Matt McGrath, starts out as high comedy, in which someone writes a former lover he has finally discarded a blue sweater the lover gave him as a gift, which he never really liked. But in the closing moments, the song moves logically into a mood that is tender and moving, quite an elegant turnabout.

It is a measure of Davis’s reputation that he has attracted very high-powered performers to interpret his material. Kelli O’Hara, who was unforgettable in “Light in the Piazza” and “Pajama Game,” did a stunning job with “Perfect Summer.” At the end of the evening Daniel Reichard, of “Jersey Boys,” sang an early Davis song, “Greenwich Time” just gorgeously. It is also a measure of Davis’s reputation that the room was not just full of Broadway types. I had been invited by my friend Ron Raines, the Broadway baritone who stars on “Guiding Light” and his wife, Dona D. Vaughn, who appeared in the original cast of “Company” and now directs opera all over the world. Among the others in attendance were opera director Rhoda Levine (who directed Ron as Papageno and Kathleen Battle as Pamina in a touring “Magic Flute” many years ago) and Joan Morris, the marvelous interpreter of American songs and wife of composer Bill Bolcom. It was a real New York Room of the sort we don’t often see nowadays.

Earlier in the evening I had been in another New York Room, the townhouse of Frank and Mary Skillern, who were honoring Donald Smith on his 75th birthday. Donald, one of the most urbane and civilized people I have ever known) has spent much of his career persevering and publicizing cabaret through the Mabel Mercer Foundation. (He produced, if I’m not mistaken, a brilliant evening honoring Mabel Mercer herself on her 75th birthday at the St. Regis 30-odd years ago. Balloons had been sent by someone who considered himself her pupil, a certain Francis Albert.) Honoring Donald were stars of the world of cabaret — Barbara Carroll, Julie Wilson, K.T. Sullivan, Jeff Harnar — and stars



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ABOUT THIS BLOG

Howard Kissel writes the Sunday “Cultural Tourist” column and does reviews of art and classical music. He has been chairman of both the New York Film Critics Circle and the New York Drama Critics Circle. In 1994, he served on the drama jury for the Pulitzer Prize. He has written “The Abominable Showman,” an unauthorized biography of David Merrick, and “Stella Adler on the Art of Acting,” both published by Applause. In 1980, he played Woody Allen’s manager in “Stardust Memories.”

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of the theater, Celeste Holm and Marian Seldes. Also there was one of New York's greatest movers and shakers, Martin Segal.

For me the most thrilling guest was soprano Licia Albanese, the first person to whom I ever wrote a fan letter, for her performance as "Madama Butterfly" at the Old Met.

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