8-22-1990

AS220's Cabaret: Amateur Night Wacko

Liam

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/as220_root

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/as220_root/2014

This is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in AS220 Digital Archive by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ric.edu.
AS220's Cabaret:
Amateur Night
Wacko

In which our Lia8 talks to the star of the day

by Liam Liffey

Liffey on the prowl: Well kids, summer's almost over and the first waltz of autumnal nip is in the air. Providence's resident theatres are already gearing up for the fall onslaught, and the area's summer season is drawing to a close. As an alternative to the summer theatre fare I've been reviewing for the past couple of months (mostly high in fiber and low in nutritional value), I wandered over to AS220 last Saturday night for a look at their Cabaret of the Oddly Normal. I guess most of the Nice Paper's readers probably know (but perhaps the audience of Providence's more conventional theatre may not), AS220's Cabaret is not theatre in the strictest sense of the term. It is not theatre with a capital 'T', as in "Darling, I'm going to the theatre tonight," to hear actors spout memorized lines that purposely express a playwright's vision. Instead, it's more along the lines of the performance cabarets on New York's Lower East Side like ABC No Rio or the Knitting Factory. Theatre in its broadest and perhaps truest form; neo-vaudeville: an unlikely mix of eclectic acts, improvised comedy, a live band, performance art — i.e., actor/writer performances, loosely held together by the interactive patter of an MC/ ring leader for an audience that is encouraged, at times almost provoked, to talk back and get involved.

Saturday night's show was no exception. Umberto Crenca, in the guise of Sir Guy d'Ouy de Portage (pronounced so it rhymes) is the infante's Virgil, a Brechtian figure in a black Latin quarter hat and red robe, backed by a sparse drum-and-harmonica horn band, leading the unsuspecting through the sprial of the night's entertainment. Some acts work, some don't. Julie Ribano, singer of original songs with annoying inner rhymes, doesn't. Space Heater does. Space Heater is an odd band comprised of (in various combinations) an acoustic bass, two electric basses, an accordion, a guy playing various homemade percussive instruments including the rasped lead pipe, and the aforementioned Crenca on flute and Flar-

Innuate, which is a combination of flute and clarinet. The sometimes discordant and cacophonous sounds emitted from this quartet (sometimes trio, sometimes quintet) are structured with symphonic construction and a clarity of composition that is truly visionary. But I'll leave the music criticism to those who really know something about it and focus on the monologist of the evening.

Brooke Berman is a local actor/writer who attended the Trinity Conservatory last year. She appeared in the Darragh Clough adaptation of Josef Roth's The Obscene Bird of Night on Trinity's main stage last season. She had the role of Iris Masciona, the orphan/street tart who is impregnated by Umberto (not Crenca, I assure you) while he's wearing the Big Head disguise. If you didn't see it, I can't make it any clearer. She is a storyteller, as she said in her monologue Saturday night, because she rarely has a lover to tell her stories to. The connection between verbal and physical communication plays a large part in her performance, and her monologue centered around the psychic neo-ex-boyfriends and lovers she's had in her past. Honest and funny, and extremely well-edited and presented, her performance was the high point of the evening. I called Brooke to find out more about who she is and why she does what she does.

Brooke, you start your performance with the admission that you are a storyteller because you don't have a lover to confess to. You tell very private stories in public to people you don't know. What's the connection?

Well (high-pitched, three-note giggle), I believe intimacy is about language. You know, I wasn't kissed until I was twenty, and it was by a man I didn't know who invited me up to my apartemen because I bought him a bag of groceries. After, I had to listen to his seminar stories, and I think I felt obliged to listen because he had become physically close (giggle). Does this make sense? Also, it's because of the phrase "pillow talk." My monologues are pillow talk, and instead of a non-existent lover, I talk to an audience. Do you know the movie Pillow Talk with Doris Day and Rock Hudson? Well, my mother always wanted to be Doris Day. I would have been Marilyn Monroe, but Madonna did it first. Anyway, pillow talk, I imagine it at this husky-husky voice. And when I hear it, I think "this is intimacy." This tone of voice. What I do in my monologues is confession.

Well, I guess that answers my question about who you do what you do. How did you get started?

Before I came to the Conservatory, I took a three-day composition workshop with Anne Bogart in New York. One of the other people who took it was a preschool teacher, and he was very into pre-verbal communication. He said three-year-olds would grab at a green crayon if they wanted a green crayon, and it was his job to say "use your words," to get them to express their desires verbally. At this point Anne looked at me and said, "That's what you need to learn to do. Use your words." This struck me as odd because a professor I had had described me as hyperarticulate. But learning to really use my words — I really am very selective about what I reveal.

Brooke, the monologue you performed last Saturday used the phrase "life café" as a real and a metaphorical place. Anything on that?

The Life Café is a real place in New York. But I love the opening line of that particular piece: "We went to Life to get soup." I love the double meaning, the play on words. The reading I'm doing Thursday at CAV is called The Woman Who Lives Off Hope. And I do, here in Providence. I love how the streets in Providence are named for Angels, Hope, Beneficent.

Anything else you'd like our readers to know?

Just tell them I'm obsessed with women and language. And Angels. And I'm no longer pretending to be an orphan.

Brooke Berman will be performing this Thursday night at CAV, 14 Imperial Place (off Bassett Street), Providence. She is currently in rehearsal for SP Stanley's The Dreamer Examines His Pillow, opening September 13th at Alias Stage. AS220's Cabaret of the Oddly Normal is (almost) every Saturday night above the recently renamed Club Baby Head on Richmond Street. Sometimes the best theatre doesn't happen in a play.