

September 12, 2004

**Theater Review**/by Kitty Montgomery

## Trio's "A Cabaret Workshop" surpasses genius

**IF YOU'RE** curious about the "wiz" behind the whimsical-profound, outright beatific offerings at this summer's Woodstock Fringe Festival of Theatre and Song, catch him in his act, and you'll know the spirit of his guiding force.

Wallace Norman, producing artistic director of a three week-end event, humbly called FRINGE, but central to our town, did some stand up sets at the Byrdcliffe Theater, in the company of soprano Watson Heintz and piano man Michael Conley, who served as their musical director, occasionally chiming in on vocals. The trio calls their show "A Cabaret Workshop—From the Great American SongBook," but what's in a name?

**WHAT THEY DO** to some 20 tunes is a kind of tap-through to the tender, ridiculous, sublime sensibilities of all mankind, via numbers you may have considered pop songs of hummable show pieces. The transport occurs not because Heintz and Norman have classic chops to draw on, or an actor's immediacy, and not just because they are both quixotically brilliant. "You gotta have heart," to effect what they do, and that's something surpassing genius.

Expanding beyond soprano categories—dramatic, lyric, spinto and such—there's your "histrionic soprano," and then there is Heintz. Featured in last season's FRINGE production of *The Great Nebula in Orion*, she is a "gonzo soprano." A lady of agape spirit, who could sing Brunhilde, and may yet, can spin "You Go To My Head" (Gillespie & Coots) like a dream echo of nothing you every heard before, no matter what famous jazz, divas have done with this song. However, you'll need to see her incarnate Bock and Harnack's "Gorgeous," Bernstein's "What a Movie!" or Sondheim's "I'm Not Getting Mar-

ried" to get wha we mean. Heintz doesn't "play" comic, she is a woman possessed by dementia supreme!

Norman goes into a song so it becomes our world. How about that Depression chestnut by Gorney and Harburg, "Brother Can You Spare A Dime," back to back with Donaldson and Kahn's "My Buddy." The nobility, the fragility, the vulnerable side of guys surfaces through Norman's nuanced interpretations that illuminate sorrow and dream beyond lyric. We wept, tears a flow.

**CONLEY**, a gracious southerner of sacred sensibilities—he conducts major Manhattan church chorales, and comes out of Princeton's Westminster Choir College, where he won a prize for sacred choral composition—managed to seem a nice guy, all through Kander and Ebb's raspberry rude "Class." When he joins Heintz and Norman, you bet they get a great choral blend.

Given his propensity for exploring the intangible infinite through song, it's not surprising Norman invited Anya Turner and Robert Grusecki to bring the musical "Greetings from Yorkville" to this festival. Ostensibly, it celebrates the life of a couple of singing song writers, who get together in a five flight walk-up to make beautiful music together, surely for joy, hopefully for profit. With smooth chanteuse moves and a warm voice, Turner soars beyond whimsical tales of life in the big gad city, when she sings of her mid-western roots. "Clara Drum," saga of her full-blooded Sioux great grandmother, who "had 10 children by five men . . . taught music in the schools for 50 years. . . the family's shame and pride. . . " is all-American wonderful as anything Woodie Guthrie wrote, and her "Iowa Summer" also aunts us back to her

source. Grusecki mouths all lyrics passionately from his piano, and occasionally tunes in to a duo.