



February 3, 2000

## **Impresario Front and Center**

by Robert Nesti

No one has done more to promote the art of cabaret singing in this area over the past few years than Will McMillan. Period. Simply ask anyone in the cabaret community and no doubt they would agree. (Personally I have the press releases and a log of phone calls to prove it.)

He has single-handedly turned the Cambridge Center for Adult Education into a thriving performance space with the *Cabaret Connection* concert series that he produces at the Blacksmith House in Harvard Square.

Last year 13 programs were sponsored, most of which could boast turn-away houses. In addition he has seen that the space has become a clearinghouse for information about all aspects of cabaret performance, from how to promote a show to offering performance master classes by artists from the Boston Association of Cabaret Artists, of which he is a founding member.

And he does so with something akin to spiritual grace, not what you expect to find in a promoter of a style of singing that has its roots in piano bars and saloons.

But his role of impresario is a more recent turn in the career of the 37-year-old former child actor (he pushed Ring Dings and Irish Spring soap), who came to the Cambridge Center as a volunteer when he heard they were going to be booking cabaret acts a few years ago.

Singing, though, is his first love, and in addition to his CCAE duties he has found the time to perform in a number of small revues and cabaret shows over the past few years, most notably *The Will and Lil Show*, a whimsical

series of theme-based revues that paired him with singer Lillian Rozin over the past few years. He has done solo shows as well — just this past summer he performed a one-man show, *I'm Still Here*, at CCAE. And he was one of 37 artists chosen nationally to attend the annual Cabaret Symposium at the O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, CT.

The success of his most recent CCAE engagements prompted him to try a larger venue, and next week McMillan and his long-time accompanist, Steve Sweeting, can be found at Scullers where he debuts his new show, *Old Love, New Love*. It points to a kind of performing circuit that he hopes other local artists will begin to follow.

"I would like to see the Cambridge Center be the kind of place where people can do their first show, then if it goes well, leapfrog over to a venue like Scullers or the Regattabar," he explained over hot chocolate recently at a cafe adjacent to the Center.

Certainly the growth of cabaret is his long-term goal, but in the short term his attentions are focused on his show, which he developed over the past year with Sweeting, a former Boston resident who is now a New York-based jazz pianist. In addition, over the past few years, the pair have recorded numerous standards (whenever, McMillan says, they could get their hands on a DAT recorder) and have assembled a compilation CD that will be on sale at the show.

McMillan takes the title of the show from a lyric by Cole Porter (from "Love for Sale") and sees it as a good description of both the material he will present and the larger theme he hopes to convey.

"I needed a title," he said, "and it just jumped out at me. Part of the reason why I named it this is because at least a third of it will be old standards; so I wanted to honor them. But when I got into it, the show turned into an exploration of the layers of love that coexist in our lives. As we get older, our hearts get bigger and more lumpy. There's usually this first love that you could never live with, but you still love; and that is simultaneous with the person you love whom you actually can live with, but doesn't push your buttons in the same way."

Initially he had hoped to contrast what he saw as the cliched view of romance found in the older songs with the more ambivalent ones seen in the work of

more contemporary songwriters, such as Stephen Sondheim and John Bucchino (a little-known but very gifted New York-based songwriter.) But in doing his research, McMillan realized that some of the older songs also convey the same shades of gray usually associated with contemporary writers.

"I was thinking that these old songs had cliches built into them that aren't always true, and I would contrast them with newer ones which say that it isn't always happily ever after. You can always in your heart have this fondness for a first love affair, this ache. Then I found older songs like 'Blame It on My Youth,' which has a lot of that wisdom in it. It doesn't seem cliched to me and packs a wallop that's true today."

McMillan sees a healthy tension between himself and Sweeting, who is more jazzy and improvisational in his approach to performing. "The tension between us is that Steve does more wacky stuff, and I'm more straight-laced. The way Steve plays is more jazz-oriented. Nothing is off the sheet music. Steve memorizes all the music. I don't consider myself a jazz singer, but he is gently nudging me in that direction. He is encouraging me to improvise more."

Despite his interest in cabaret, McMillan doesn't see himself as a typical cabaret artist. "There's a way that I almost verge on being a preacher. I'm one to go to the spiritual heart of things, rather than the rowdy, good time, let's-sing-all-the-old-songs thing. What feeds me is more spiritual."

To this end he recently participated in an evening of song, meditation and ritual called "Soulful Sundown" at a Unitarian-Universalist church in Boston, which he hopes to take to other UU churches around the country this next year.

Tickets are now available for *Old Love, New Love - An Inspiring Evening of Music* at Scullers Jazz Club, 400 Soldier's Field Road at 8:00pm on Wednesday, February 9, 2000. Tickets are \$10, and are available by calling (617) 562-4111, or thru Ticketmaster at (617/508) 931-2000.

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