

THE THEATER MIRROR

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Company's Up and Coming

by Beverly Creasey

Used to be when you'd say you were off to the Cambridge Center for Adult Ed, friends would ask what course you were taking.

Now they ask who's singing. The CCAE is now synonymous with cabaret. That's thanks to a shaman named Will McMillan who single-handedly engineered the "Cabaret Connection" — and he can sing, too!

March is cabaret month — so Will and his cohorts did what they do best.

Will & Company featured the sensational songs of local composers, highlighting some gorgeous songs by Somerville songwriter Barbara Baig. A dynamo named Valerie Sneade joined Baig in presenting a dozen beauties, like the bittersweet, poignant "Somewhere He Waits."

Baig's songs, like the best dramas, tell a complete story but with little — sometimes big — surprises in the narrative. She shuffles up images like the "green and tender words" growing beneath the snow. And she wittily draws out a phrase so that its negation makes it funny, like the penultimate verse of her righteous "I Hate

To Cook" song: "There is no end to all the things that I can't make." Sneade's sweet, breathy voice can become bold and brassy when the lyrics need her to strut and as tender as a teardrop when she wants to break your heart, as in a song called "Graduation Day" which Baig wrote for her after Sneade told her about a boyfriend who died (and who was instrumental in getting her to sing.)

McMillan and Sneade dueted on the delightfully coy "Like So" and all three blew the house down with Baig's anthem, "Let Me Be Strong. The unflappable McMillan is so smooth and loose as a performer that he (and virtuoso-- pianist Doug Hammer) can start over, rethink a phrase and even talk to us about the composer — in the middle of the song — and it makes it more endearing and more fun.

Barry Rosenberg's clever songs fit McMillan like a glove, and he charmed his way through Arnold Olenick's feisty, flirty "No Way To Be Blue" (with Hammer building the music before our eyes to a glorious fortissimo). McMillan delivers on Ernie Lijoi's exquisite heartache in the searing "Turning To Stone" and can he ever wring out the pathos, especially in Baig's plaintive, mournful "With These Hands."

In addition to the glow you get from letting these mini-dramas wash right through you, you experience the joy of discovery.

You've just heard songs which are going to be recorded, sooner or later, by Bette Midler or Betty Buckley.

If you missed the show, *Will & Company* repeats on March 31st in Worcester. You should see this one...come snow or high water.

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