



CABARET » REVIEW

What it sounds like when love is gone

**THE ALL-CANADIAN CLASSICAL
CABARET**

Queen of Puddings Music Theatre
At the Four Seasons Centre
in Toronto on Wednesday

BY ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN

Cabaret is less a genre of music than a negotiable point of view. John Hess, a pianist who is also co-artistic director of Queen of Puddings, defined the undefinable nature of the thing when he said at the start of Wednesday's midday concert at the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre that his brief to several Canadian composers was to write songs in accordance with whatever "cabaret" meant to them.

Most of the nine composers seemed to agree that cabaret is a medium of disillusionment. The best in that line was *Tobacco Road*, an elegant, beaten-down song by Rodney Sharman, with text by Joan Skogan. "You were my Marlboro man," sang soprano Shannon Mercer, in one phrase summing up the unreality behind the dream, and the song's central conceit: that love is a form of addiction. Sharman's slumping harmonies told us all we needed to know about the emotions screened by the helpless bravado of Skogan's lyrics. A few phrases in German, and the style and title of another Sharman song (the obsessive *Liebeslied*) implied that for this composer, thoughts of cabaret tend to swing the compass toward Weimar. But Sharman also showed a comic country-music streak in *Crossing Over*.

Others had Paris on their minds. Henri Miro and Harry Freedman hit the boulevards with a tango and a waltz, respectively, and Jose Evangelista's *Injurieux* sounded almost like an Edith Piaf number with filthier lyrics (by Raymond Queneau). Linda Catlin Smith's lean and lovely *Nostalgia* made me think of the knowing simplicity of Erik Satie's music.

A few items were minidra-

mas that strained the boundaries of a single song. James Rolfe's prickly *Swipe*, with text by Anna Chatterton, followed a woman's self-defeating tactics in love, and Melissa Hui's Broadway-conscious *Back to You* (with text by Anne Fenn) portrayed a meeting of two women, one rich and vain, the other (the narrator) not. Fenn also wrote the comic, cross-cultural mash letter that Christopher Butterfield turned into a piece of oompah modernism in *If You're Inuit*.

Michael Oesterle's uninhibited tonal waltz *Asparagus Pee* proved that cabaret could be at home in the bathroom and reminded me that one major attraction of cabaret for contemporary classical composers is that it lets you do something in a popular idiom without appearing to be slumming. In spite of its origins in bars and dives, cabaret has a "higher" pedigree than most types of popular song. It probably helps that its origins are foreign, and that its life as a real article of popular consumption is over.

Mercer and soprano Carla Huhtanen were mostly quite convincing in these songs, though at times their operatic training seemed like heavy equipment where lighter gear would have served the purpose better. Director Tom Diamond gave them some clever advice, but also overdirected a few numbers. In the end, I think cabaret is always about scraping down to a painful level of reality, and it can be hard to get there when someone is hamming it up. At the piano, Hess played with exactly the right blend of assurance and nonchalance.

This show was one of the first in the Canadian Opera Company's current series of free programs at the Four Seasons foyer performance space. A recent anonymous gift of \$2-million makes it a cinch that this successful series will go on for years to come.

» For more information on the free series at the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre go to coc.ca.