For performers seeking to perfect their craft, available training grounds are increasingly hard to find. The Catskills "borscht belt" hotels, with an endless appetite for nightly entertainment, are but a fond memory. The heyday of summer stock theaters, the "straw hat" circuit, ended decades ago. The vaudeville circuit of local theaters throughout the nation, decades before that. The Ed Sullivan variety show on television, and its emulators, are mostly gone from the air. And so are the numerous small night spots that provided the showcases for their booking agents to mine for new talent.

As the eminently successful KT Sullivan observed, if you want to really know how you’re doing, don’t ask your friends or family. How then? There still are opportunities for those seriously wanting to know "How can I be better?". There are a limited number of professional schools, academies and/or classes where expert advice and criticism are provided with the same honesty and alacrity as justifiable praise. Among the most notable, for cabaret folk, is Erv Raible’s annual summer program...
in New Haven, Connecticut—the Cabaret Conference at Yale University, developed in conjunction with the Yale School of Drama/Yale Repertory Theater.

July’s 2008 Cabaret Conference was a coming together of cabaret luminaries, forming an eminent and professionally-successful faculty eager to share their experience and expertise with highly talented professional and hope-to-be-professional performers from across the U.S. and abroad.

Former participants fondly refer to the nine-day summer session of instruction and critique as “Cabaret Boot Camp.” The military allusion is right on target. The Conference is tough, exhausting, and yields a proud sense of accomplishment at its completion. Because of its reputation and the virtually unanimous praise of former students, the demand to attend the Conference is strong, and being admitted as one of its select three-dozen students isn’t a cakewalk.

Beginning in January, applicants audition in a dozen different cities, from New York and Los Angeles to Toronto and London. (If the locations turn out to be too difficult for someone in Council Bluffs, the admissions committee usually will agree to consider audition tapes.) Over the years, they’ve come from almost every state in the union, plus the U.K., France, Germany, Greece, New Zealand, Russia and South Africa.

The faculty of this summer’s master teachers under the aegis of Executive Director Raible was an inspiring gathering: Julie Wilson, Sally Mayes, Carol Hall, Steven Lutvak, Alex Rybeck, Shelley Markham, Sharon McNight, Paul Trueblood… the list goes on and on. Mentors and visiting consultants offered sage advice on succeeding in the cabaret world, as the master teachers put students through the paces, often in potent no-holds-barred, one-on-one sessions, tailored to the students’ needs and expressed desires.

Participants came to the Conference with differing objectives. The range of ambitions was wide. Chicagoan Joe Bonadonna wanted to “learn how to personalize songs.” Seattle pianist/singer Victor Janusz, who “enjoys a full-time career as singer/pianist,” wanted “to get my guts up,” to sing to an audience without the “security blanket” of his piano.

Conference was a coming together of cabaret luminaries, forming an eminent and professionally-successful faculty eager to share their experience and expertise with highly talented professional and hope-to-be-professional performers from...
other artists who share my love of music and vocal performance.” New Yorker Billie Roe’s goal “was to get a stronger sense of myself as an artist, to learn how and where I might fit into the current cabaret market.”

On the other side of the coin from the seasoned entertainers, Sean Phillip Mabrey was one of the “hope-to-be” participants. A drama student at the University of Arkansas, he came away feeling “very proud” of the character in a play, versus acting a song in a seasoned entertainer’s cabaret setting.

Tiffany Bailey from North Hollywood. She was one of the “hope-to-be” participants. As an artist, to learn how and where I might fit into the current cabaret market."

On yet other topics, Rose Andrez describes Ev Rable’s “wonderful seminar on the business end of cabaret.” Sharon McNight and Jason Graee concentrated on comedy, “serious business” and “hard work” as Billie Roe describes it. Her two mentors were “an inspiration...spontaneous, fun, high energy, informative,” but not easy. “They bullied, they bossed, they did everything to help us see the humor in any song,” Roe reported. “They made me look at material a whole new, different way.” Conference guest speakers rounded out other topics. New York cabaret critic David Finkle addressed the group. Another day, The Duplex’s booking manager and former technical director, Thomas Honeck, provided participants with an understanding of sound and lights, and how best to work with their technical directors.

In addition to their seminars and classes, faculty members put on performances of their own, a “see how it’s done” combined with a chance for everyone to relax and enjoy some special cabaret. Julie Wilson paired one night with Rita Gardner in a presentation appropriately named Classic and Classy. A student’s response to that event: “Julie Wilson and Rita Gardner in concert! Unbelievably unique, each of them. I mean, how often do you get to see two artists of this caliber each do her own rendition of the same song, ‘Mack the Knife’? That alone was a master class for me.”

Carol Hall and Steven Lutvak gave an intimate, three-hour, “just among us” performance/seminar, They Write the Songs, in which each discussed songwriting, related some unpublished anecdotes, and performed many of the songs they’d written. I observed an ambiance in that theater, the feeling among all those present of being “connected,” that was even warmer than the July night outside.

Possibly the most valuable moments for the students were the one-on-ones, where they would meet with master teachers to discuss matters of their personal concern. “How should I handle this kind of song?” perhaps, or “how should I select a musical director?” The students were offered several opportunities, and they chose the individuals with whom they most desired personal meetings.

Looking back, students praised their particular mentors.

“Rita Gardner played the biggest role for me. I am forever thankful to her.” Shelley Markham: “very generous and wonderful.” Laurel Massé: “Insightful, generous and patient.” Pam Tate: “taught me a visualization technique that had an immediate effect on my performance.” Julie Wilson: “...beautiful on the inside and out. She...engages you with her soul. We were mesmerized by the pure focus and wonderful energy and story-telling coming from her eyes.” Ev Rable’s direction: It’s all about trust, focus, taste, and collaboration, and I have that with Evr.” Alex Rybeck: gave “a wonderful system on how to work a song and really own the lyrics.” Each of the participants had one, two, three and sometimes more, to whom he or she owed special thanks.

The students’ summations of the entire program were to the far side of enthusiastic.

Joe Bonadonna declared it was “hard to find the right words to describe the experience,” but said, “I gained more experience in one week than can be gained in years of doing the same old thing.” Lee Engele stated, “I felt like my life changed forever.” Victor Janusz spoke of “the incredible commitment and one-on-one action each of the faculty members give to this extraordinary program.” Jerome Elliott, when everything he’d learned during the week came together in his final performance: “It was transcendent.” Emily Green: “The Conference was the chance of a lifetime.”

In describing the overall experience, “intensive” is the single word most often used by students to characterize it. Other adjectives: “grueling,” “exhausting,” “thrilling,” “exhilarating.” Some described little time for sleep, or the need to skip meals to keep up. Nonetheless, having witnessed some of the meetings, talked to the students and read over their responses to our “tell us about it” questionnaire, one prediction seems assured. Like those who have undergone the rigorous military training from which “Cabaret Boot Camp” took its nickname, what will remain with the participants at Yale the longest—while acknowledging the arduous aspects of the Conference—are the gratification of their personal development, the enduring camaraderie and the proud sense of accomplishment.
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