

MUSIC

Haughty and naughty

Portland rekindles an intimacy with hard-to-define, easy-to-love and oh-so-gay cabaret

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE

From the Portland Gay Men's Chorus to Boris & Natasha. Gershwin at American Heritage to Sinfonino at Dante's. Performers of all kinds—and lots of them queer—are stepping up to share their songs and their stories amid Portland's growing cabaret scene.

"Audiences are starved for musical entertainment," says Alan Anderson of Broadway Rose Theatre Company in Tigard. "The good news is some of our best musical theater performers in town are now creating their own opportunities and developing cabaret acts."

Known primarily for its summer-stock musical theater, Broadway Rose expanded its season last year by adding a holiday show and playing host to three one-night cabarets. Anderson says the series, which began its second season last month, is especially appealing because it offers an inexpensive evening of entertainment.

Rick Lewis is a veteran music director, performer and playwright who has worked with Anderson at Broadway Rose and at other venues in Portland for a number of years. He also recently began producing his own cabaret aboard the Portland Spirit cruise ship on the Willamette. Dubbed "River of Stars," the series presents high-profile entertainers in an intimate setting.

The shipboard cabaret opened in February with Michael McGuire,

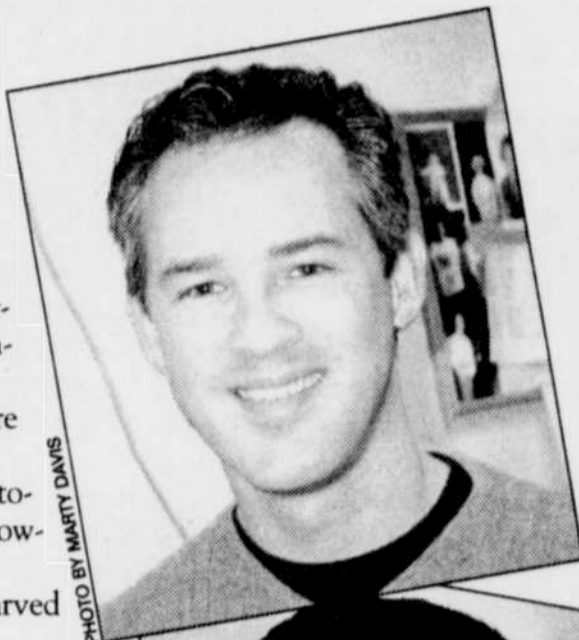


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

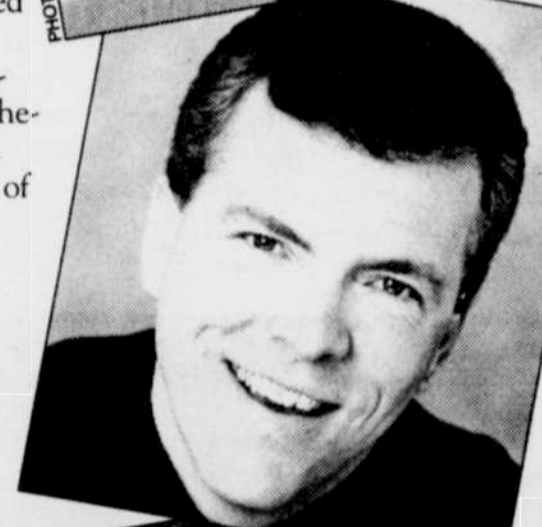


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS



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From top: Alan Anderson, Rick Lewis, Jo-Anne Nofield and Harriet Guthrie bring cabaret to Portland audiences

the Tony-winning actor from Broadway's *Les Misérables*.

"When I came here nine years ago, it was shocking to me that Portland didn't have a cabaret," recalls Lewis, who is gay.

"Cabaret was the only thing that was missing in Portland's artistic scene."

But the city's cultural base is getting stronger, he says. Artistic alternatives are becoming more varied and audiences are willing to take more risks.

So are performance venues such as Wilf's Restaurant & Piano Bar at Union Station. In fact, Wilf's began setting Portland's new standard for traditional cabaret more than a year ago when Jo-Anne Nofield took a chance on booking local performers for regular Tuesday night gigs.

While many entertainers at Wilf's are gay and have a musical theater background, their cabaret shows are not as narrowly defined. An artist's repertoire sometimes includes music from a

Broadway show but more often features standard ballads, jazz or lesser-known, poignant selections that give each act a distinctly personal touch.

And there's always humor, remarks Nofield. "The cabaret at Wilf's doesn't get raunchy, but there's innuendo."

Nearby in the Old Town district is Hobo's, a longtime queer fave for more informal cabaret-type entertainment, featuring a gay-manned piano bar complemented occasionally by vocalists. Here the scene is

subdued, and the music tends toward light jazz, old favorites and a lot of show tunes.

"People get tired of canned music," says Hobo's owner Harriet Guthrie. "So, it's nice to have someone at the piano to talk with, to ask for a song."

It's that sense of intimacy, spontaneity and personal connection between performer and audience that defines cabaret. The "fourth wall"—an imaginary division between audience and cast that allows a willing suspension of disbelief—isn't found here. A cabaret artist doesn't just perform for the audience, but recognizes it.

"You can go to a theater and see a fabulous show, but there's still that distance there," explains Nofield. "This singles it down to one person and brings them to the focus."

Comeback for cabaret, old chum

Here are just a few upcoming opportunities to see cabaret in Portland. Watch the *Just Out* events calendar for additional listings.

Broadway Rose Theatre Company presents local favorite chanteuse Susannah Mars in her cabaret "Mars on Life" at 8 p.m. March 22. Then, on April 26, Terry Palasz, the "Polish Diva from Milwaukee," appears. Performances are at Tigard Community Friends Church, 15800 S.W. Hall Blvd. Tickets are \$12 from 503-620-5262.

Wilf's Restaurant & Piano Bar, 800 N.W. Sixth Ave., presents a special Variety Show cabaret March 25 featuring the best entertainers of the past year. Jerry Stuart performs April 1 and 8, followed by Susan Overcast on April 15, 22 and 29. All shows begin at 7:30 p.m. \$10 cover charge and reservations are suggested at 503-223-0070.

The "River of Stars" cabaret series aboard the Portland Spirit continues March 28 and 29, with Jodi Benson, the voice of Disney's Little Mermaid. Debbie Gravitte, Tony winner for *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*, follows April 25 and 26. Call for times. Regularly \$36, tickets are half-price if you mention *Just*

At the same time, a cabaret venue with food and drink provides an atmosphere in which patrons can feel comfortable to socialize with friends and even mingle with performers.

Every cabaret show is different, Lewis adds. "It's the intimacy of somebody just talking with the audience. Because the audience can talk back, it's really honest entertainment."

Although most performers find their bread and butter in larger shows with longer runs, cabaret gives them the opportunity to go solo for a night or two. They can perform as themselves, try out new material and put together a show in which they really connect with their audience.

That relationship may explain the cabaret community's *Will & Grace* casts of predominantly gay men and straight women. "The gay male performer wears his heart on his sleeve a little easier than a straight man," suggests Lewis. "And, with a propensity for a gay audience, where are you going to find more adoration as a straight woman?"

Out. Board near Southwest Salmon Street and Front Avenue. Reservations at 503-224-3900.

Hobo's, 120 N.W. Third Ave., presents gay pianists most nights; a few vocalists will return in April. Music generally begins at 7 p.m. weekdays, 8 p.m. weekends. No cover.



Jodi Benson croons on a river boat cruise March 28 and 29

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