

“On Directors” by Roy Sander

A singer asked for my comments on directors. I'm happy to oblige.

The first question is whether cabaret shows *need* to have a director. An analysis of the thousands of shows I have attended yields no simple, single answer. In the terrific-show category, I have probably seen just as many offerings that were director-free as shows that carried a directorial credit. The same can be said for mediocre shows and, for that matter, for perfectly dreadful enterprises. I have seen people whose work showed considerable improvement when they began working with a director, and I have seen performers whose work suffered when they changed directors. (The person who raised this issue noted that she has been working with a director for the past year and has found that it made an enormous difference for her.)

So, the first question actually becomes whether *you* should be working with a director. When developing a new show, nearly everyone, no matter how talented or how experienced, can benefit from having a third eye present at some point in the process. Mind you, that role need not be fulfilled by a *director*; feedback from any knowledgeable person could do the trick. (Such assistance could be credited or anonymous, depending on the particulars of the situation.) Or it could be that your musical director (or in some cases, your voice teacher) is providing whatever collaboration or assistance you need.

However, directors can do a lot more than serve as a third eye. They can assist you in finding and selecting material, help develop your interpretations, work with you to sculpt your show, help you develop a theme (if you choose to have one), do the blocking, make suggestions on the use of props, help you with your patter, or perhaps even write your dialogue.

If you conclude that you wish to work with a director, you must ask yourself *why* you are looking for a director, what is it that you want a director to help you with. There are several fine directors on the cabaret scene, but they are not equally good at all things. Some are masters at finding clever material, structuring an act, or writing patter. Some are strong at staging and blocking. Some are skillful in helping singers to penetrate their material and bring depth and texture to their interpretations. A very few are good at all of the above.

In cabaret, the most crucial attribute for a singer to have is strong interpretive ability. This is a complex issue, entailing a number of technical skills (vocal technique, hand and body language, acting skills, etc.) and emotional factors. Until you have mastered this ability, you should concentrate your efforts in, and seek help with, this element. Mind you, I'm not saying that all other issues are insignificant, just secondary. I have seen many—no, make that many, many, many shows that were well constructed and blessed with intelligent, funny, informative patter, excellent choice of material, splendid arrangements and accompaniment—indeed, with everything but rich, illuminating song interpretations. As a result, despite their virtues, these shows were ultimately unsuccessful—like an exquisitely crafted bracelet with bits of base metal where diamonds and rubies ought to be. Making a general observation, I would say that many people are worrying too much about theme, structure, and other less critical elements, and not

enough about the more crucial interpretive dimension. If interpretation is not a problem for you, you can focus on the other elements that contribute to presenting a successful show.

Now, how do you know which directors have the skills you need to augment and complement your own strengths? See the work of as many directors as you can. Observe which ones are skilled in the areas you are looking for. But note that it is nearly impossible to discern the extent and nature of a director's contribution from a single show. When someone is credited as director, you do not know whether he/she participated actively in the development of the show from the outset, or was brought in as a third eye after most of the choices had already been made. I can't tell you how often I have criticized in my own mind what I was certain was a directorial decision, only to find in post-performance discussion that the director had no say in the matter whatsoever. Accordingly, try to see several acts by each director and look for a pattern. If you know the performers and you are comfortable with this, you might ask them for their opinions.

Meet with each director whose work impresses you. Make certain that he or she understands your talent and your needs. Consider running the same idea in front of different directors and comparing and evaluating their responses. Remember, the director's job is to help you realize *your* artistic vision, not to *provide* you with one. *You* are the one on stage. I have seen many acts fail because of choices that were dictated by the director but personally uncomfortable for the performer. And if you don't have an artistic vision, the more fundamental question to ask yourself is whether you are ready to perform at all.

By the way, the singer who asked me to comment on directors also asked for my opinion of encores. This practice, which I consider a stupid and mindless convention, is one of my pet peeves; I'll address it in my next column.

Feedback and Follow-Up

I received a comment on my last column from Maryann Lopinto that I think is worth repeating and commenting on. (I reference it with her permission.) Observing that many performers spend time after a show speaking with their friends, she suggests that instead you concentrate on greeting audience members you do not know, people who might become your new audience. In general I agree with her. If the venue permits you to linger in the show room, you might stop by each table of strangers and thank them for coming. You could also ask whether they would like to be on your mailing list. If you are required to greet people outside the room, don't get tied up with your friends and relatives while your new fans are left to cool their heels in the receiving line. But while you certainly want to make yourself available to your audience, don't position yourself in such a way that people are obliged to wait in line just to make their exit. Make it easy for people to speak with you, but don't force them to.