



THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL DEFENSE OF HONORS THESIS

Caitlin Sams, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in Fall 2003, successfully presented the Lee Honors College Thesis on February 24 and 25, March 2nd and 3rd.

The title of the paper is:

"Fair Warning"

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jay Berkow', written over a horizontal line.

Mr. Jay Berkow, Theatre

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jamie Reed', written over a horizontal line.

Ms. Jamie Reed

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mark Liermann', written over a horizontal line.

Mr. Mark Liermann, Theatre

Fair Warning

Honors Thesis for Caitlin Sams

The project I completed for my Honors Thesis was a cabaret starring myself and a fellow graduating senior Nick Kitakis. My project was completed when we presented our cabaret entitled *Fair Warning* as a part of the Stars and Moon Cabaret Series, hosted by the Theatre Department. Performances took place on February 23rd and 24th and March 2nd and 3rd. The goal in this assignment was to compose an approximately 45 minute show which both showcased our best abilities as musical theatre performers and entertained an audience.

Being that this was the first show I had ever orchestrated, I had little idea of the various challenges that might present itself during the process. Our first step in creating the show was to brainstorm ideas about theme and material. Based on cabarets we had seen presented in the past, Nick and I decided early on that we wanted the evening to have a lighthearted quality. We wanted our cabaret to reflect our easy-going personalities, off-kilter sense of humor, all the while showing off the singing and acting abilities we've worked for four years to develop.

We decided the best way to accomplish this was to concentrate on creating a repertoire that consisted mainly of comedy numbers, particularly for duets, adding a sparing number of dramatic ballads for contrast. I think this decision helped us focus on creating a show that was able to engage the audience for the entire duration, yet was still well-rounded. Another decision that I feel was really helpful in achieving the quality we wanted was enlisting two guest performers. Not only did this add more personality to the show, but it expanded our available material and allowed us to do group numbers as opposed to only duets. The inevitable complication with involving more people, however, is that schedules become extremely difficult to coordinate. Between the five

performers and musicians, our only available rehearsal times ended up being late at night. This was an inconvenience for everyone, but a sacrifice I think was well worth the added quality to the show.

Surprisingly, we managed to create an abundant list of potential material right away. The challenge actually became how to choose which songs to cut, rather than finding songs we thought would work. Nick and I decided on duets and group material together, and selected our own material for our solos. This allowed us to assure we were able to showcase what we felt were truly our best abilities. For example, there were several different styles of music that I wanted to showcase. I wanted to show the different vocal qualities I possess, as well as my range as an actress. This meant searching out some new material, and in some cases, writing my own. I selected the song “Under Separate Cover” to showcase my belt register and my ability to realistically act my way through a song. To contrast that, I included the comic number “Paris Makes Me Horny” to display my more broad character abilities. Originally I had hoped to include a number that showed off my legitimate soprano voice, but in the end I had to cut this intended number for both time and continuity of the whole show.

A considerable challenge that I met was completing my goal of writing my own song for my cabaret. This is something I had wanted to do for quite a while, but I found myself to be somewhat out of practice in the way of songwriting. I managed to complete the song about two weeks before the show, and was very pleased with the end result. The song is entitled “The Love of My Real Life” and I wrote it as a tribute to my fiancé. It was important for me to include this song for a variety of reasons. First, it showcased my abilities as a singer/songwriter and guitarist, which I haven’t had the opportunity to do in

quite some time. Second, it displayed my ability to sing in a pop/rock genre, which is quite different from traditional musical theatre style. Third, it allowed me to share a very personal piece of work with the audience, which I feel helped to connect them to the show as a whole. I think including this song in the show, though odd for a traditional musical theatre cabaret, allowed me to convey an important part of who I am as a performer, therefore creating a connection between myself and the audience. I had to allow myself to be vulnerable in putting my own material out there for judgment, but I felt the audience had a genuine response to this which drew them into the entire show.

I feel Nick accomplished a similar effect by choosing to perform the Cat Stevens song "Trouble" with me accompanying on guitar. Again, this was a bizarre choice of song for the setting, but it was a song that he had an obvious connection to, which means that the audience is more likely to make a connection to it. I felt the incorporation of these two songs allowed us to give the show the personal touch we were hoping for.

While we were confident that the comedy material we had selected would hit the mark in terms of entertainment, we did struggle with how to address the fact that some of it was rather dark, adult humor. We were not overly concerned that there would be children in the audience, due to the fact that the main-stage show our cabaret followed openly included foul language and graphic descriptions of violence, however we knew some of our material bordered on controversial. For example, our opening number "Mary Sunshine" included blatant references to smoking marijuana. Not surprisingly, my song "Paris Makes Me Horny" included several sexual references, as did other numbers in the show. While all of this material was very obviously presented as being humorous, we still felt it may be rather shocking for some audience members.

This led us to give the show its name *Fair Warning* in an attempt to caution those who might be offended by our less-than-traditional material, and intrigue those who appreciate dark humor. We attempted to market the show along the same lines, creating posters that advertised the show as being slightly explicit without crossing the line into offensive.

One element of the show which I would have changed in retrospect was the scripting of our dialogue between songs. In an attempt to keep the show constantly moving we tried to include introductions and banter only when necessary. However the dialogue we did include, we left relatively open for improvisation every night. Most introductions came out naturally each night with only slight variations; however there were definitely some performances where the banter did not work as well as others. I did not feel this was a major detraction from the quality of the show, though I think it would have served us better to solidify exactly what we were going to say every night. Had we prepared a more exact script, we would have been certain that our dialogue would consistently work the way we envisioned.

Other unexpected challenges in preparing the cabaret included tracking down physical copies of some of our chosen material. Several of the numbers we had selected were difficult to find because the shows are relatively unknown. One song that Nick performed is from a show that is currently on Broadway, and for which no published score exists. Our only option for obtaining this music was to special order it from someone's personal music library in New York City. Another problem we had not anticipated was the fact that the show preceding our cabaret had a run time of nearly three hours. This meant that many audience members were inclined to leave straight away. To

combat this, we tried to start the show as quickly as possible each night, in an attempt to entice audience members to stay. We relied heavily on word of mouth to publicize the show, and made a lot of effort to personally invite everyone we knew to attend. Our efforts appeared to be well spent, since we had reasonable sized audiences considering that the show started so late.

As with any live show, problems arose during the performances themselves which required to be dealt with on the spot. For example, Brynn, one of our guest performers, completely lost her voice the morning of our opening show, and had to muster all her strength just to be heard. Luckily, her health was much improved by the second weekend of shows. During our closing performance, I actually managed to completely fall off the stage during our opening number. This was the first time that had ever happened to me, and will hopefully be the last. Yet these types of spontaneous challenges are inherent in performing. They were each handled with professionalism, and are now another piece of valuable experience we can carry with us.

My mentor Jay Berkow helped guide the project by previewing the cabaret in its final rehearsals and giving notes on how we might improve our performance. His suggestions included small physical adjustments such as keeping focus at the eye level of your audience, if not looking directly at the audience members, as opposed to looking out over the tops of their heads. This is something we could not have corrected ourselves, since we cannot see the show from the audience's perspective, so his input was very useful in this sort of critique.

Jay also gave us acting adjustments to assure that we were as connected to the material as possible. With any acting piece, you must have a clear objective and action

that you are always playing, and a song is no different. In a cabaret scenario it can be easy to fall into the habit of simply standing and singing, rather than pursuing an active goal. While the voice may sound equally beautiful, it is always more interesting to watch an actor trying to accomplish a goal through song than to watch a performer who is merely singing for singing's sake. Jay reminded us to keep these objectives in mind with each of our songs, to assure that the whole show remained as engaging as possible. He also served as a valuable test audience to assure that our more questionable material was, as we had hoped, still in good taste.

Putting together this cabaret was a difficult, but truly worthwhile experience. It forced me to identify my true strengths as a performer, which is an invaluable thing to carry with me as I enter my professional career. As I prepare to move to New York City this fall, I now have a tested repertoire of songs which I know stand up to an audience's approval, and that I can perform time and time again. Performing this show reaffirmed my confidence in my ability to give a performance that is dynamic in both singing and acting. This show also reconnected me with my love of songwriting. I truly feel that I accomplished the goal of creating a cabaret that showcased both mine and Nick's greatest abilities as performers, as well as entertaining the audience.