



New Downtown home for ACT

Shannon Forsell leading company into the future

SHANNON FORSELL CAN REMEMBER THE FIRST time she saw the Connoisseur Room – an underused special event space in the heart of Downtown at 115 E. Ohio St.

“In my dreams, that was the room that was in my mind,” she said, thinking back to a day, long before she even returned to the American Cabaret Theatre, when she thought about launching her own cabaret effort.

Now, dreams and reality have merged. Forsell is indeed back at American Cabaret Theatre, as its managing director. But it is a distinctly different operation than it was just three months ago, when Forsell signed on to lead a new Signature Cabaret Series to complement the ACT’s traditional revue-style productions.

Turns out those productions, while critically acclaimed and locally popular, were a serious financial drain on the theater company which for 19 years had called the Athenaeum home. In late January, ACT’s Board of Directors made the decision to sever ties with the Athenaeum, cut two-thirds of its six-person staff, and focus on two programs:

□ The Signature Cabaret Series, which will feature not only national artists, but also a mix of well-known local talent, such as Forsell herself, Brenda Williams, Jimmy Guilford and Steven Stolen. The 2009 series, to be announced later this month, will be dubbed “Rediscover Cabaret.”

□ The Cabaret Academy, geared to train promising young performers into an area of the music field which Forsell said is mostly overlooked by traditional university music programs. As part of that effort, she added, educational workshops and masters classes will be taught not only by the national performers stopping at ACT, but also by some of the region’s best performers, directors and technical staff.

All of this will happen in the space at 115 E. Ohio St. owned by long-time ACT backer John Irish. Forsell believes fans will be quickly won over to the new environment, which she said is “like stepping into the Cole Porter era in a plush night club in New York City.” She said the Connoisseur Room with its arched red-velvet booths, dark wood walls and wall-to-wall antique bar is familiar to far too few. “It’s just too great a place to not be seen.”



▲ The Connoisseur Room seats about 100 at its space at 115 E. Ohio St. which features arched red-velvet booths, dark wood walls and a wall-to-wall antique bar. An awning with the ACT logo will be added to improve its street presence.

Forsell said the new space will seat about 100 people, with little work needed to get the space in shape. She is hoping for a late March grand opening celebration which will feature some singing, cocktails and desserts. At that event, the 2009 season will be formally presented.

To improve the building's street presence, an awning emblazoned with "American Cabaret Theatre" will be added. Inside, Forsell plans to add some intimate lighting which ACT has purchased thanks to a Lilly Endowment grant. The existing large tables will be replaced with tables for two or four people – but the room's existing, cushy chairs will remain. "The chairs were made especially for the room," Forsell said, promising that cabaret-goers will find them extremely more comfortable than those the ACT has offered in the past.

Gone in the newly minted version of the American Cabaret Theatre are the big-cast revues popularized by ACT founder and long-time artistic director Claude McNeal, and his successor, Bob Harbin, over the past couple of years.

Barbara Weaver Smith, president of the ACT Board of Directors, told The Indianapolis Star in late January that the five main-stage shows presented in 2008 lost \$40,000 per show. With those shows a thing of the past, the ACT will focus on fund-raising to support the academy program.

Leaving the historic Athenaeum was a difficult decision, Smith indicated in a press release. But she cited three reasons for the move – rising lease fees, the lack of any revenue from beverage sales, and competing sound from the Biergarten which often interfered with the fans' enjoyment of cabaret shows.

Smith said the ACT's many changes, while difficult, "will absolutely create a more sustainable, viable organization that can safely weather the times ahead." She added that the move provides "a significant reduction in overhead and production costs and will provide a higher-quality product. This is a win-win for our audiences and for those donors who graciously fund our organization."

Where McNeal honored the tradition of cabaret with revues, Forsell prefers a format that is more authentic to the tradition of cabaret itself. "ACT will produce smaller, more intimate and authentic cabaret shows, shows more true to the cabaret art form," she said. "Shows will be more of an 'experience' allowing audience members to feel a part of the show rather than passive observers.

She is also looking forward to lining up performers from around the country. She noted that current well-known stars such as Michael Feinstein, Liza Minnelli, Bette Midler, Tony Bennett, Diana Krall, and Harry Connick Jr. all got their starts in cabaret settings.

Forsell added that the shorter performances will allow folks to join their friends, experience a high quality performance, and still have some space in their evening. "We will also offer more diverse show times to accommodate the after work crowd as well as the late-night crowd," she said.

Ballet will be first to use vacated theater space

THE THEATER SPACE IN THE WEST WING OF the Athenaeum won't stay quiet for long. In March, the Indiana Ballet Co. will perform "From Shakespeare With Love" in the space recently vacated by the American Cabaret Theatre. (See "Events," page 27.) If that show goes well, there could be more of the same type of productions there.

"We're really sad to see the American Cabaret Theatre go," Cassandra Stockamp, executive director of the Athenaeum Foundation, said after the theater troupe ended its 18-year run at the historic Downtown facility. "It's been a long, mutually beneficial relationship," she added, noting that she understood why the Athenaeum space no longer fit ACT's financial model.

But, she added, the Cabaret's departure sparked a flurry of interest in the theater space. Stockamp is talking to one large theater group, and has also talked to about a dozen groups interested in one-time use.

The theater seats about 450 in cabaret-style seating, and as many as 800 in standard theater seating. Stockamp said the space was ideal for smaller touring groups that aren't appropriate for other venues such as the Murat Centre's Egyptian Room. ■

Forsell is already well-known to local music lovers. As a founding cast member of the original ACT repertory company, she performed in nearly every show for over a decade from 1990 to 2000. A graduate of DePauw University, Forsell has performed her one-woman cabaret show in New York City, and recently returned from the National Cabaret Convention as a part of a Creative Renewal Arts Fellowship grant from the Arts Council of Indianapolis, funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc.

Smith has every confidence that Forsell is the right person to lead the theater into its new era. "Shannon has a long and successful history with the theater," Smith said. "Her knowledge of theater and the cabaret genre, her experience on both sides of the stage, and her skills in marketing and development make her a great fit to carry out this new vision for the organization."

- Bill Brooks