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# ARCHIVES

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## SHANNON'S BACK

Seasoned singer wants to  
bring true cabaret (and  
some old friends)  
to Indy audiences

BY BILL BROOKS

**S**HE WAS EVA PERON, BELTING out “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina” from the balcony of the American Cabaret Theatre. She was Sally Bowles singing “Cabaret” and the saucy “Mein Herr.”

In countless ACT reviews of the 1990s, she was the sultry to Brenda Williams’s sassy – a star in a musical repertory company supposedly without stars.

Shannon Forsell is also a symbol of what once was American Cabaret Theatre, the alleged good old days when she helped create a loyal constituency which may not have packed ’em to the rafters, but at least produced robust enough crowds to pay the rent.

Today, she gains another role – as the official link between ACT Past and ACT Future. Forsell has been named the theater’s co-director, specifically charged with developing the Signature Cabaret Series, one- or two-weekend series which will be designed to showcase the wealth of former ACT performers as well as



Mark Kesling, president and CEO of American Cabaret Theatre, goes over some plans with Shannon Forsell, who will produce the Signature Cabaret Series beginning in January. ►

attract regional and even national talent to the Indy stage.

Forsell said she is looking forward to presenting the “art of Cabaret” to Indianapolis audiences. “It’s a style of performing not being done in Indy,” she added. “I want to reintroduce the city to what cabaret performances are all about.”

The new series – along with a Late Night Series designed to appeal to more youthful and/or alternative audiences – represents a move by ACT to diversify the way it presents the musical genre known as cabaret. Since its founding by artistic director Claude McNeal in 1990, ACT has presented cabaret in the form of musical review, each show revolving around a theme ranging from “the ’50s” to blues to swing. There were a few exceptions, mostly in the form of “book musicals” such as “Evita,” “Cabaret” or “Man of La Mancha.”

Now, on the one-year anniversary of being named president and chief executive officer of the American Cabaret Theatre, Mark Kesling has unveiled a multi-faceted program which pushes ACT well beyond its well-known Main Stage series.

“When Mark called me, he said he wanted to put the ‘cabaret’ back in Cabaret Theatre,” Forsell said. He wanted to build upon the well-reviewed Main Stage series which has been produced the past three years by Bob Harbin, a master of finding new talent around this city.

But therein has lain the rub: a key element of the American Cabaret Theatre’s mission has always been to incubate young talent. The audience, unfortunately, gets attached to the best of that talent – and grows alienated when talent such as Shannon Forsell or Brenda Williams

inevitably moves on.

“Cabaret is a launching ground for talent,” Kesling said, “then they go on to different things.” But Kesling, while eager to build a new future for the American Cabaret Theatre, thought, “Why do we have to lose the past? Claude McNeill did some really good things – and the audience told us they wanted to hear that again.” Plus, he added, “We were looking for ways to do the ‘old’ and ‘new’ together – to round out, more fully utilize, the space.”

Kesling’s problem is that the “old-timers” couldn’t commit to the time required for traditional ACT reviews, which ran for six or seven weeks. And, more importantly, not for the salary which could be offered.

Forsell explained: It costs a lot of money to mount a six-week show, and there’s only so much cash left for the number of performers required to stage a review. “It’s not feasible to work like that when you’re not in your 20s,” she said. The solution – create shows with shorter time commitments, fewer performers, and therefore higher salaries.

To accomplish that goal, 2009 Main Stage productions will be staged in slightly shorter runs – four to five weeks each – creating seams which will be filled by Forsell’s Signature Series. She will perform in some – but produce all. That fits her desire to work more behind the scenes, spending less time in front of audiences.

Kesling said the switch will free the Main Stage Series from having to worry about holiday and seasonal themes. The Signature Series can do that to better effect, since most of the shows will only run one weekend each. As such, Forsell can mount “Cabaret for Lovers” on Valentine’s Day,

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or "A Salute to Judy Garland and Friends" on Mother's Day weekend.

The Judy Garland show, Forsell said, is evidence that the Signature Series, while focusing on bringing back cabaret *emeriti*, will also reach out well beyond Indianapolis. Nationally known pianist Richard Glazier, most well-known for his interpretations of Gershwin, will star in the Garland show, an event which will also feature 20 of Judy Garland's original costumes.

Kesling, whose job description includes worrying about ACT's bottom line, said the addition of the Signature Cabaret Series and the Late Night Series – along with the new Together Again: Music and Poetry Series already under way, produced by Indiana Poet Laureate Norbert Krapf – represents a way to better utilize the facility he pays rent for 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Under the previous setup, ACT used the stage 21 percent of the time; the new series pushes that mark up to a more acceptable 47 percent.

He also thinks the new series will better represent the cabaret genre. When cabaret was created in the 1880s in Paris, it was staged in restaurants and nightclubs, many described as informal and intimate 'taverns' with the audience sitting at cozy tables, consuming food and drink and enjoying the performers as well as the community of patrons attending the show.

Today's cabaret, however, has developed into a performance venue – not a restaurant or bar setting where the performer can have to fight for the audience's attention. Forsell herself has done the latter in recent years, singing weekly at a Northeastside restaurant. She has also continued an on-stage relationship with Jimmy Guilford, another former ACT regular who has written a new collection of songs which Forsell wants to feature in a Signature Series show.

She hopes the allure of the stage will help get some of her old ACT pals such as Williams back into the theater. "Anyone from the old gang who wants to come back," she said. Kesling embraces the thought that ACT can once again "showcase some really good local Cabaret talent – talent which has matured." In looking beyond Indy's borders for regional and national performers, he also believes ACT can be an incubator to create the kind of cabaret performers who now really thrive only in major cities such as New York City and Chicago.

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### **2009 Main Stage Series**

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**Produced by Bob Harbin**

□ "Raise Your Voice: A Celebration of Gospel Music," what Artistic Director Bob Harbin calls "an all-different kind of 'church', with a community church outreach." Jan. 30 through March 1.

□ "Cabaret," a revised edition of the original 1966 stage production, but staged like it was done in 1998 at the old Studio 54 in New York City. March 20 through April 19.

□ "Burlesque," with Harbin experimenting with one of the original forms of cabaret. May 15 through June 13. (And which may continue in the Late Night Series.)

□ "Babes on Broadway," a young people's production put together by the cast members themselves, based on songs from Broadway. July 10 through Aug. 9.

□ "Bustiers to Beehives," an original production spotlighting girl groups from the Andrews Sisters to the Spice Girls. Oct. 2 through Oct. 24.

□ "Cabaret USO," focusing on the song and music of the USO, both in wartime and in peacetime since the 1940s. Nov. 20 through Dec. 20.

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### **Signature Cabaret Series**

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**Produced by Shannon Forsell**

□ "Cabaret and Cabernet," January (dates to be set).

□ "Cabaret for Lovers (Or Not)," Feb. 13.

□ "Master Cabaret Artist and Workshop Series #1, March 6-7.

□ "Misha Aire, A Celtic Cabaret," March 13-14.

□ "A Salute to Judy Garland and Friends," featuring nationally known singer-pianist Richard Glazier. May 9-10.

□ "Master Cabaret Artist and Workshop Series #2, June (dates to be set).

□ "A Star Spangled Cabaret!," July 3-4.

□ "Shannon Forsell: An Evening of Torch Songs and Other Hot Numbers," Sept. 18-19.

□ "The First Annual Mass Ave. Halloween Costume Ball," October (date not set).

□ A world premier musical, to be announced in November and to be staged in November 2009.

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### **Late Night Series**

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**Produced by Bob Harbin and Shannon Forsell**

This new series will be designed to appeal to a more youthful and/or alternative audience, with more edgy and experimental performances. Shows will begin at 11 p.m. on weekends, showcasing emerging talent and acts which may eventually find their way to the Main Stage. Open stage nights and an emerging artist series will be featured in the series.

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### **Together Again: Music and Series**

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**Produced by Norbert Krapf**

Launched this September, this series coordinated by Indiana Poet Laureate (and Downtown resident) Norbert Krapf showcases a variety of musical genres and performers intermixed with some of the best poets from across Indiana. The series is being filmed for WFYI public television viewers to be aired in the upcoming season by Sharon Gamble. ■

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As for the mature local talent, Kesling believes in the lure of cabaret itself. He was amazed at all the people "who came out of the woodwork" for the cabaret-style fund-raiser staged the past two years for the Beckmann Theatre, people such as Forsell, Williams, Peggy Chambers and David Ruark. "Their loyalty to the concept, the genre, is bigger than life," he said.

Forsell has just such a loyalty to the theater to which she gave "the skinniest years of my life." She said the American Cabaret Theatre has always allowed young performers to learn their craft. "This is the place where I grew as a performer," she said.

Learning the craft, she said, will remain a major focus, in a formalized way. The 2009 Signature Cabaret Series will include two workshops, allowing guest artists to pass on

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some of their experience and expertise to the city's young talent. "The joy, for me, is to see great cabaret performers, and to allow them to train Indianapolis performers, to reinvigorate them," she said.

The workshops, Forsell said, will fill a gap in today's formal music education. "Nobody teaches you showmanship," Forsell said. "When I began, I wasn't 'acting' the song."

Kesling wants to be a proactive recruiter of talent. "The talent pool exists in the Indianapolis area," he said, "but often remains unidentified by performing arts organizations due to a lack of connection to the minority community." He plans to develop new avenues to identify talent by reaching out to churches, schools and community centers, and by using the talents of Artistic Director Bob Harbin to help prepare potential performers for the audition.

"With cutbacks in the arts occurring through the region," Kesling continued, "it is important that organizations like ours develop high-quality performances that not only expose students to local professional talent, but that also deals with important regional topics."

Looking at his historic theater space inside the Athenaeum, Kesling would like to spread the wealth beyond the musical. "There has been an explosion of small groups of artists looking for a venue to perform new work or to begin the formation of a new theater company," he said, noting that ACT is developing partnerships with young organizations such as the Sapphire Theatre Co. and ShadowApe Theatre Co., and to dance groups such as Moved Dance Troupe and Naptown Stomp.

The ACT will also reach out to more than young performers. Kesling wants the cabaret performances, educational programs and "non-threatening environment" to attract lower-income residents from the surrounding neighborhoods

who may never have attended a show in the theater, or any theater. He also wants the audience to have broader representation in the African-American and Latino communities – a step which has already been taken by Harbin, whose Main Stage shows on blues and Motown music have been dominated by African-American casts.

Kesling believes the talents of ACT's two artistic directors, Forsell and Harbin, complement each other. "Having Shannon Forsell and Bob Harbin in the same theater is a blessing," Kesling said. "Bob has an incredible ability to find talent, while Shannon has the ability to do the cabaret and connect with the audience."

Kesling wants to use those talents, and the theater space itself, to create new and varied opportunities for young people to engage, both as audience members and in productions.

To reach those goals, Kesling said the theater must be affordable. Last month, in fact, ACT cut ticket prices to all shows in a reaction to the well-publicized economic woes of the community and nation.

He thinks of cabaret as "theater for the everyman." He knows his history well enough to know that cabaret and related forms such as burlesque have endured through tough economic times. "It is essential," he said. "Cabaret has to be here during hard times. Historically, people need an escape."

Forsell agrees, understanding the difference between performing in a musical such as "Evita," where there is an understood wall between stage and audience. Not so in cabaret, where entertainers make direct connections with the audience. "People, more than ever, want that connection," she said.

Added Kesling, "This is a big experiment to find out, 'what does Indianapolis want?' I think there's a market – and nobody else is filling that market." ■



▲ The cast of "Solid Gold Soul," which played to strong reviews last month, is typical of the casting and programming by producer Bob Harbin to broaden the American Cabaret Theatre's appeal throughout the community.