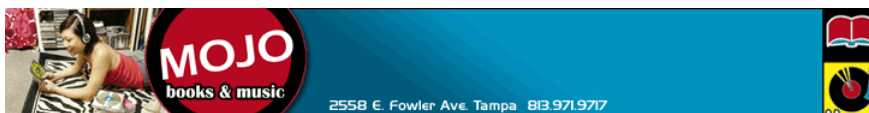


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Arts: Features

Outrageous fortune

FST's latest is a wealth of racy cabaret riches.

By **Mark E. Leib**

Published 01.30.08

European Cabaret is a pleasing hodgepodge of European and American music, sung skillfully and staged ingratiatingly at Florida Studio Theatre's Goldstein Cabaret. Some of the songs are ones you've known for decades -- Jacques Brel's "Sons Of," Edith Piaf's "La Vie En Rose," Cole Porter's "It's Delovely," even Lerner and Loewe's "Thank Heaven for Little Girls." Others, especially those by the Weimar Germany duo Spoliansky and Schiffer, will be new to most theatergoers -- "It's All a Swindle," "When the Special Girlfriend," "I Am a Vamp" and "Maskulinum/Femininum."

Because the music is so miscellaneous -- when did Brecht and Eisler ever meet Charles Aznavour? -- the evening never adds up to a single powerful impression. But performers Tara Bruno, Alan Gillespie, Stephen Hope and Forrest Richards are skillful and fun-loving enough to give *European Cabaret* an invigorating velocity that's almost as good as coherence. No matter -- any show that gives me Piaf, Brel, Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin gets special status in my book. I only wish I could have heard "Ne Me Quitte Pas" and "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien."

The most interesting material in *European Cabaret* -- which was developed by Richard Hopkins, Rebecca Langford and Jim Prosser -- comes from the Berlin cabarets of the '20s and '30s. What's most interesting about these songs -- "It's all a Swindle" ("Everyone/Swindle some/ What the heck/ Bounce a Check") and Nelson and Tucholsky's "A Little Attila" ("Every woman, from whore to nun/ Would kneel and pray for the reign of Attila the Hun") -- is the worldview they suggest. "Swindle" only makes sense in a time of rampant capitalism and corruption; "Attila" satirizes not only masochistic sexuality, but also a society searching for a strongman to dominate it. It's also the German songs that most recall the ambience of sexual ambiguity in the Kander/Ebb musical *Cabaret*. "When the Special Girlfriend" tells the tale of two apparently heterosexual women who go shopping together and discover that they like each other more than they do their men, while "Maskulinum/Femininum" is all about women and men experimenting as their opposites. The two male leads of *European Cabaret* sing "I'm a Vamp" in drag, and one admits that "I bite my men and suck them dry/ Then I bake them in a pie." Politics turns up, naturally, in the songs by Bertolt Brecht, the most interesting -- and chilling -- of which is "Marie Sanders," about a German woman who runs afoul of the authorities because she has a Jewish lover: "Marie Sanders, does your boyfriend have raven hair?"

I have to admit, though, that I missed the more familiar Brecht/Weill songs like "Pirate Jenny" -- as political a shocker as was ever written -- and even "Mack the Knife." But with only two acts and two hours to work with, it was inevitable that the show's creators would leave out at least a few of our favorites. The good news: The unknown songs are often fascinating. What a surprise to find as explicitly sexual a piece as 1920's "Take It Off, Petronella," by Hollander and Tucholsky, a plea for a stripper to strip one-on-one, or "Oh, How We Wish That We Were Kids Again," making fun of nostalgia itself. And I can't remember ever hearing an anthem like Hollander's "The Kleptomaniac," which seems to celebrate shoplifting: "I stole brassieres before I had a pair of tits," and "I'm not guilty because I'm legally insane." It all begins to make sense when one of the singers informs us that Germany abolished censorship in 1918. Immediately, it appears, songwriters raced to be more outrageous than their rivals. In any case, many of their songs are far more racy than anything you can presently hear on American radio -- and that's saying something.

The French songs in the show are mostly ones made famous by Piaf and Brel, with Piaf's "La Vie En Rose" sung in French and English in Act 1, and then coming back for an encore in Act 2. But the emotional high point of the French songs is Piaf's "Mon Dieu," sung intensely, perhaps even too intensely, by Bruno. This is a song in which a woman begs God for just a little more time with her lover, and there's as much anguish in the melody as there is in the words. Brel, as I said, is represented only by "Sons Of," a lovely enough song, but not nearly as interesting as 20 others -- "Quand On N'a Que l'Amour," "La Valse a Mille Temps" and "Amsterdam" come to mind. There's a familiar pseudo-French song included -- Lerner and Loewe's "Thank Heaven for Little Girls," from *Gigi* -- but in 2008 it's hard to hear the tune without noting that pedophiles must find it particularly apt. (Even with the refrain "Without them what would little boys do?" the song sounds perverse.) And getting back to true Frenchness, Charles Aznavour's "She" has the strange distinction of reaching Number 1 in the U.K. singles charts in 1974, while hardly mattering in France or the U.S. Still, the French sections of *European Cabaret* are so stirring, I can only hope that FST will decide to devote a whole evening to Brel or Piaf or Aznavour.



enlarge

Maria Lyle

CABARET OF LIGHT: (Left to right) Stephen Hope, Tara Bruno and Alan Gillespie vamp it up in FST's production of *European Cabaret*.

INFO

European Cabaret
4 stars
Florida Studio Theatre, 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota, 366-9000 or floridastudiotheatre.org. Runs through March 22. 6 p.m. Tues., 7:30 p.m. Wed.-Thurs., 6 and 9 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 2 and 7:30 p.m. Sun. \$26-\$29.

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