

Cabaret Camp

By David Finkle

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At the Yale Conference With Erv Raible

Let’s hear from someone who devoutly believes it’s not all about the voice. The adamant speaker is Erv Raible, who’s run several Manhattan cabaret clubs since 1978 and who has for five years helmed the Cabaret Conference at Yale, where 36 wannabes and a few already-ares matriculate every August for a 10-day immersion in the art of intimate-room performing. From the late 1980s through 2000, the indefatigable Raible was also instrumental in the same sort of industry camp at the O’Neill Theater Center’s Cabaret Symposium.

Telling the Story

Not a man to avoid an opinion on a subject he’s made a fervent study, Raible says, “Frequently a good voice might stand in your way. You’re more worried about hitting your big notes or your money notes or whatever you want to call them. You’re more worried about if it sounds pretty. God forbid that you crack. God forbid you have some sort of a vocal glitch. The truth of the matter in this business is that’s not what it’s all about. It’s about telling a good story. It’s about relating to an audience and connecting with them. That isn’t always done by having the most fabulous voice in the world.”

Going on with a laugh, he says, “Some years ago, a journalist from I think it was U.S. News & World Report asked me something akin to what we’re talking about here, and I said, ‘I would rather have a singer who has five good notes, is on pitch, and can tell a wonderful story than someone who has the most gorgeous voice in the world and is brain-dead.’”

With that in mind, Raible explains his purpose at Yale: “I’m not going to bring anybody up there who can’t sing – anyone who doesn’t already have vocal coaches back where they’re from. The program is not about the voice. It’s about teaching the acting of a song. There are people there who are capable of teaching voice. I’m not one of them. Most of my faculty will say that’s not what they do. Some of the musical directors do.”

Nevertheless, Raible stresses that voice is an inevitable topic of conversation at the conference, where the faculty number 15 and the musical directors five. “The voice thing keeps coming up all the time,” he says, “but we don’t go at it as ‘You’ve got to be doing this; you’ve got to be doing that.’ Frequently it will be, ‘We know you have a fabulous voice, but now...’” He lets the obvious end to the sentence trail off. “We’re constantly lowering keys, because far too many people are trying to sing too high. They think they have to be able to sing high Cs on every song. It’s not necessary. A lot of people are singing too much. They’re oversinging everything. Everything has to be huge and big. They never pull back and do something quiet and lovely.

“[For] an awful lot of people – and it goes with the pop world a lot, I think – if it’s big and loud, it’s enough. And big and loud, as you know, isn’t enough. You want more color, more variety, more nuance, more whatever you want to call it. A lot of times when they lower the key, they go, ‘Oh, my God, that was so much easier, and it was so much easier for me to get the story out, because I wasn’t worried about hitting the high C,’ or a high Q-flat or whatever it was they were trying to hit.”

One thing the longtime mentor can attest to regarding vocal-production attitudes at the Cabaret Conference is the results: “A month after the conference is over, I send out the evaluation form asking what they thought of every single session and every single person. The thing you get back a lot of times is, ‘The one thing I learned is it’s not all about my voice. I’ve got [a good voice], and it’s a lovely thing, and I can use it when I need to, but I don’t need to use it all the time.’”

But don’t get Raible wrong about reprioritizing the importance of voice in cabaret. He gives the state of a singer’s pipes plenty of consideration – and not just during the 10 days he has hopefuls absorbing the rudiments at Yale. “When I’m out auditioning – and I go out all over the country, 10 cities, including London,” he says, “it’s primarily the younger people who audition, ‘younger’ meaning 30 and under. A lot of them seem to have a pitch problem.

“I attribute it to the things they’re poking into their ears – the little headphone things that are constantly [damaging] the ear, which is beautifully designed by nature to filter out some of this God-awful sound we have to put up with. As a result, it’s pumped right directly into their eardrum 24 hours a day. It kills their hearing. And I mean literally 24 hours a day. The only reason they would take their earphones out of their ears is if there was an emergency. They might be 25 and hear fine right now, but by the time they’re my age, they’ll be deaf.”

Don’t Do Your Homework On Stage

About worrisome threats to vocal production, Raible is firm. “As far as I’m concerned,” he says, “there are three things. Breathing – a lot of time you go off pitch if you don’t have enough air in there to get it out. Hearing – a lot of people who don’t hear well have pitch problems and intonation problems and whatever. But there’s also a third one which we’ve found with a number of performers: [They] are not in the moment. For whatever reason, in the middle of a phrase they’re singing [they] are already worrying about the next phrase and what they have to do in it. The end of the current phrase they’re in goes right in the toilet.

“As Tovah Feldshuh would say up at camp, ‘Each new thought in the song has to be like you’re giving birth to it. It has to be a new thought. It’s not something you’ve rehearsed to death or something that while you’re out there on stage you’re setting up. You have to arrive at it when you get there, not be worrying about it – doing homework on stage.’ You should be able to leave your homework at the edge of the proscenium before you step out of there.”

Raible's not through. He gives a wry smile and says, "Another thing I see is what I call 'the *American Idol* audition' – somebody coming in for me who doesn't even need an accompanist. It's absolutely horrifying, because what they do is absolutely horrifying. It started the second year of [our Yale] auditions in Minneapolis. A boy got there early, and he seemed to be antsy and in a hurry, and I said, 'The pianist is due in another 10 minutes, and we'll be fine.' He said, 'I don't really need a pianist. I'll do it a cappella.'

"He gets out there, 16 bars flat-out of some just hideously beastly pop song that repeated the same words 25 times. Then he stops. Dead cold. I went, 'Do you have anything else for me?' He does another one. Sixteen bars and stops dead again. I asked him the question I always wanted to ask everyone: 'If you were to come to Yale this ummer, what would you be looking for from us?' He said, 'Exposure.' I said, 'Anything else?' He said, 'No, that would do.' Most of them don't get that there's a lot of work involved in it. They think it's easy."

Happily, it's better at the conference, according to Raible, because "we're getting a lot of theatre people who realize a lot of these people who've gotten Tony Awards and Tony nominations got those nominations because they were able to walk out on that stage by themselves for one whole song and deliver to an audience as if it's a cabaret piece, rather than four-walling it as a theatre piece. The one thing I've always said about cabaret: We do not produce chorus people. We produce stars."