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Convention-al wisdom, fortunately, was wrong

By Chip Defaa

When impresario Donald Smith announced the first Cabaret Convention in 1989, many people were skeptical. Prevailing wisdom was that if performers were having trouble filling tiny cabarets, how could they fill Town Hall? But the first convention was a great success. Smith has expanded the event each year, the 1997 edition has included seven concerts, all still at Town Hall. Tickets sell out quickly. Smith has now successfully launched West Coast editions of the convention, and is readying his first-ever London Cabaret Convention.

New York's cabaret scene generally is healthier today than in 1989. I think Smith's convention, which each autumn stirs interest in cabaret artists, has made a significant difference. What were among the highlights of Friday's Cabaret Convention tribute to the late songwriters Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz?

Michael Feinstein - the same Michael Feinstein you'll pay a fortune to see in concert at Carnegie Hall on Oct. 28 made a surprise appearance, singing and kibitzing. He offered not only "That's Entertainment," but also a bit of a parody version he says he learned from Schwartz himself: "That's Yentatainment."

KT Sullivan, Mark Nadler and Mark Murphy, dressed memorably in baby clothes, sang brightly of their murderous feelings for one another in the amusing "Triplets." More poignantly, Sullivan lent her fine, pure soprano to "Dancing in the Dark," letting every meaningful word sink in; that was hard to beat. Murphy shared an obscure Dietz and Schwartz song of considerable beauty, "But What About Me" (written for a film in 1934, but never used).

I'll be looking forward to hearing more from Dane Vannatter, whose 1995 Cabaret Convention debut, although green in some ways, was memorable. His reading Friday of the Ethel Waters-associated "Thief in the Night" was graceful. He has gained poise in two years and no singer on the bill had greater tonal beauty.

Eric Comstock, Billy Stritch, Billy Philadelphia, Joyce Breach and Lenna each contributed a couple of songs apiece. The night's entertainment level was actually quite variable. But the convention is useful in letting audience members get an idea of which performers they would not want to pay to see whole shows by - as well as which performers they *would*.



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