

'Sitting in the dark, being sung to' Bay Area Cabaret series kicks off season this weekend

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By Jim Van Buskirk

When Marilyn Levinson told friends that she was producing cabaret in the Bay Area, they assured her "it should do well, the movie did well." Levinson laughs, but the widespread unfamiliarity with cabaret (the art form, not the Broadway musical) obviously rankles.

Levinson is passionately committed to bringing "high-quality Broadway and cabaret performers to intimate and elegant venues." By day a self-described "Marin soccer mom," Levinson's journey to cabaret producer is illuminating. Always interested in music and theater, having worked with producers Joe Papp and Arthur Cantor in New York, and locally for Marine's Memorial, ACT and with Steve Silver, she was encouraged by her father to study law at Stanford. After practicing law for many years, Levinson began experiencing debilitating back-pain, which threatened to end her career. Trying to determine what to do next, she wrote to Barbara Cook's agent inviting the Broadway legend to perform in San Francisco. "I was thinking, hoping, that she wouldn't respond," Levinson admits, but when she did, it led directly to the formation of Bay Area Cabaret, a nonprofit organization which produced a 2004 season of three Diva Evenings: Barbara Cook at Davies Symphony Hall, singer/songwriter Ann Hampton Callaway at Marines Memorial and opera singer Karen Slack at Giorgio's Restaurant in Marin.

"For the first time in my life, I knew I was going in the direction of my heart," says Levinson. She still sounds amazed at the power of cabaret. During the Cook concert, Levinson, having lost her mother to the devastation of Parkinson's disease, was unexpectedly flooded with fond memories of her mother before the disease. "There is nothing quite so emotionally satisfying as sitting in the dark, being sung to." In this world of ever-increasing technology, Levinson believes, there is something human being lost. "I'm trying to build community around cabaret, to reestablish connection."

As the first of this season's Bay Area Cabaret concerts, Marin Mazzie and Jason Danieley return to the Bay Area on Oct. 23, following their stellar performances in the SF Symphony's *Candide* and *Of Thee I Sing/Let them Eat Cake*. Mazzie has starred in *Kiss Me Kate*, *Passion* and *Ragtime*, while Danieley has been lauded for his roles in *The Full Monty*, *Floyd Collins* and *Candide*. The husband-and-wife team will be performing their cabaret show "Opposite You," which first appeared as part of the Lincoln Center American Songbook Series, and is being released as a CD in November. The concert features duets, solos, and medleys from such songwriters as Irving Berlin, Harold Arlen, Stephen Sondheim, Jerry Herman, Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens.

When she first heard Karen Mason years ago at the Duplex in New York, Levinson felt like she was in Mason's living room, "experiencing the words, the patter, who she is." A consummate cabaret performer, Mason will debut "The Winner Takes It All" on Dec. 11. The title of Mason's show comes from an ABBA song, appropriately since she originated the role of Tanya in the Broadway hit *Mamma Mia*. The show will include material from her brand new CD *The Sweetest of Nights*, as well as some holiday favorites.

Perhaps the freshest take on cabaret is Darius de Haas performing the Stevie Wonder Songbook. The Obie Award-winning singer, actor and dancer will be making his Bay Area debut on Nov. 20. De Haas performed with Vanessa Williams in the 1994 *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and was the special guest on her Everlasting Love tour in 2005. His solid voice, "which he takes all over the place," has been heard on a dozen recordings, including the concert version of *Dreamgirls*. His 2002 solo album *Day Dreams: Variations on Strayhorn* has been acclaimed as a "modern masterpiece." De Haas, who, like Billy Strayhorn, is both black and gay, was one of the highlights of this summer's R Family Cruise, conceived by Gregg Kaminsky and Rosie and Kelli O'Donnell to cater to gay families. Levinson anticipates that the de Haas concert will be "the runaway hit of the series, perhaps because the material is fresher, more modern. Darius breathes new life into the art form. Like all this year's performers, he has honesty, authenticity, and blazing talent."