

Life, and a cabaret

By Pauline Dubkin Yearwood (11/04/2011)

New Piven play recreates an era through its songs

When Rebecca Joy Fletcher performs in "Cities of Light," her theatrical cabaret musical that opens Nov. 5 at Evanston's Piven Theatre Workshop, she'll be channeling Jewish cabaret artists going back many decades.

Fletcher, a New York playwright, singer, actor and cantor, describes "Cities" as more than a cabaret show. It's a two-character play (her accompanist, Allison Hendrix, is the other one) with a storyline that celebrates cabaret as it was performed in Berlin, Paris, Tel Aviv and Warsaw in the period between the two world wars. The art form was all but wiped out by the Holocaust.

The play is a celebration of that world, not a lament for what was lost, Fletcher says.

"Cities of Light," which opens Piven's 40th anniversary season, is a world premiere in its present form, Fletcher said in a recent telephone interview. It's based on a cabaret show she performed at Piven a year ago; when it was well received, she decided to "take it further" and make it into a play with two characters and a story.

The original show grew out of on-site research Fletcher did in the four cities, using archival material in German, Hebrew, Yiddish and English. Most of the songs in "Cities of Light" are in English.

Fletcher traces her interest in pre-war cabaret to a discovery she made when she was in cantorial school and serendipitously came across a five-box CD set of archival recordings of German cabaret artists.

"When I put on those CDs, I had what I can only describe as a mystical experience," she says. "I had a profound sense that I knew what these people were going to sing next. I had a profound sense of affinity to the material. I felt like I came from there."

In a way, she did. Her maternal grandmother was from Berlin and was a music lover. "I had a sense of my lineage from this very sophisticated, secular, very Germanic world," Fletcher says. "An artist, a person is lucky if they get one of those experiences in a lifetime."

The Jewish connection was equally strong. "I knew that in Berlin 80 percent of the artists involved in cabaret, from set designers to performers, were Jews, although they performed equally for Jewish and non-Jewish audiences," she says.

After doing some research into the era, Fletcher says, "my choice was not to write a book about it but to create a work of theater, something that engages the intellect but is emotional and experiential."

Pre-World War II cabaret "was a very populist art form," Fletcher says. "It was like electricity – it spread very quickly to different cities. Jews in Warsaw had a profound respect for what was going on in cabaret in Berlin, for instance, and they made it their own. In Tel Aviv they made it about pre-state Israel, about settling the state. This art form is so malleable, it is responsive to each Jewish subculture's needs."

Fletcher herself, although she has served as a cantor at a number of New York-area congregations, has recently taken on the mission of bringing this all-but-lost era of cabaret to a wider audience.

It's a mission that she relishes. "I feel a very strong affinity to the art form wherever I encounter it, particularly when it is created by Jewish artists," she says. "It's both overtly and indirectly talking about what it was like to be Jewish in that world at that time."

During the Holocaust, "the art form was 99 percent snuffed out. Many artists were killed or emigrated, and in Germany the Nazis shut down the cabaret art form."

But "Cities of Light" "is not about that," Fletcher says. "I have this opportunity to celebrate a world that existed before the Holocaust, and it's a world that has very optimistic, witty and smart. For me to be able to touch that world is very exciting. It's like opening an experiential door so that audiences might walk through it."

The story concerns a diva, Cat, and her accompanist, Jimmi, played respectively by Fletcher and Hendrix. Cat is "a mysterious chanteuse," Fletcher says, and Jimmi a pianist and professor of ethnomusicology. The play, while built around the cabaret songs, explores "the surprising and explosive interaction between them, and through that we celebrate the remarkable contribution of Jewish cabaret artists," she says. "We've taken incredible musical gems and integrated them into the body of a story."

Most of the songs won't be familiar to Chicago-area audiences, but a few might be, Fletcher says. She recalls performing in Paris, where she sang a Yiddish tune, "The Pearl Song."

"No one ever knows it. People love it but it's very little known," she says. "While I was performing I heard an old guy in the audience singing it. I talked to him afterwards, and he said he grew up with it."

The best-known tune is probably "Laila, Laila," which, Fletcher says, was written for Tel Aviv cabarets in 1948. But it morphed into something different, and "a lot of American Jews grew up singing it in camp and youth group and never thinking about it in the context of cabaret. It was a very different song then."

Using the piece in her play fits in with one of Fletcher's goal: "Take something familiar and frame it very differently."

Fletcher notes that Piven is offering many post-show special programs in connection with "Cities of Light," from audience talkbacks to discussions with Jewish educators to Yiddish tango lessons (visit www.piventheatre.org for the list.)

Along with the show itself, she hopes that the programs will create "a happening for audiences, a show that really engages audiences so we can interact with them just as they did in the cabarets. The special events extend that," she says.

"If audiences feel alive and engaged, I would love nothing more."





Remembering Jewish cabaret as ‘Cities of Light’

By MYRNA PETLICKI Contributor November 1, 2011 5:54PM



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A rich and relevant Jewish cabaret scene flourished in Berlin, Paris, Warsaw and even Tel Aviv in the 1920s and '30s. Rebecca Joy Fletcher shares her fascination with that significant period in cabaret history in "Cities of Light," which is receiving its world premiere at Piven Theatre Workshop under Marti Lyons' direction.

Fletcher, the New York-based playwright, actress and cantor, who performs Jewish cabaret around the world, stars in the show, playing a mysterious diva named Cat. Allison Hendrix co-stars as her accompanist Jimmi, who is a professor of ethnomusicology.

"Cat shows up and takes Jimmi on a wild ride in which Jimmi's heart is opened in all kinds of ways she couldn't have predicted," Fletcher said.

The majority of the songs are performed with English translations, although there is a smattering of French, German, Yiddish and Hebrew.

Rebecca Joy Fletcher plays a cabaret diva named Cat in "Cities of Light" at Piven Theatre Workshop.



'Cities of Light'

Piven Theatre Workshop, Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., Evanston

7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. Sundays, Nov. 10-Dec.11

\$25 - \$30

(847) 866-8049 or www.piventheatre.org

History specialist

Lyons, who studied at Piven Theatre Workshop when she was in high school, is the literary manager and dramaturg at Lookingglass Theatre. She had just finished working on "The Last Act of Lilka Kadison" for that company when she was approached to direct "Cities of Light." "The Last Act of Lilka Kadison" is about a Jewish teenager who fled Poland on the eve of World War II.

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"So Jewish theater and performance in the interwar period in Europe was something I had already been living in the world of for some time," Lyons said. Consequently, she was "super excited" when she was offered the opportunity "to work with someone like Rebecca, who has been spending a lot of time in the research and the artistry of the music of this period."

Lyons believes that the cabaret music from the four cities on which the show focuses, "is some of the most interesting art of the 20th century."

What has most surprised Lyons about this project is learning that lyrics of many songs in the show are as relevant today as they were back then.

She cited a song called "Swindle," with lyrics that say: "Everyone swindles some, so vote for who will steal for you."

"I was first drawn to the material over a decade ago as a performer," Fletcher said. "I first came in the door through the German cabaret material, which is the most well-known and the most documented and researched."



International research

It occurred to Fletcher that there were likely fascinating Yiddish language cabarets in Warsaw, even though they hadn't been delved into much by performers.

"I started doing research from New York, and with the help of some professors in other places," she said. "That culminated in my creating a show called *'Kleynkunst!'*"

She performed the two-person piece off-Broadway.

"That led me to really wanting to go further in looking at other places where cabaret thrived and other places where Jews were really important in taking the art form to the next level," Fletcher said.

Guessing that one of those places would be Tel Aviv, Fletcher received a grant to go to Israel and research that topic. She also received a grant to study Jewish cabaret in Warsaw.

Fletcher toured a cabaret version of "Cities of Light" across the country and in Europe for two years before embarking on the full-scale show for Piven. Her research journeys are heavily reflected in this world premiere production.

"There's a kind of magical travel that happens to the characters between different cities," Fletcher said. "For me, it was much the same. One place led me to the next. And, at the heart of it for me, there's a real sense of connection to the material as a performer. There's also a fascination for me with this time period.

"We know now the end of the story," Fletcher continued. "But at the time, for many Jewish artists, there was so much hopefulness and, despite all the obstacles, there was so much passion and possibility."