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Bebe Neuwirth: Stories With Piano #4

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
Thursday Mar 21, 2013



Bebe Neuwirth launched her fourth series of story songs at 54 Below

Taking to the stage in a sleek black dress and strappy stilettos, singer/dancer/actor Bebe Neuwirth joined piano player Scott Cady for her showcase "Bebe Neuwirth: Stories With Piano #4." Through her emotional staging, humor and pantomime, Neuwirth managed to transport the (mostly gay and gray) audience with her to Bill's Beer Hall in Bilbao ("The Bilbao Song"), or the lush jungles of Burma in Kurt Weill's "Surabaya Johnny."

"No one's meaner than you, Surabaya Johnny/ My God, and I still love you so," Neuwirth sings, her face contorted into a mask of embarrassment and shame over her love for this handsome rat. It is thrilling and heartbreaking at the same time.

Her voice is strong, and while her range isn't what one would call amazing, Neuwirth imbues these songs with such passion and that she brings the stories to life on stage. Her slight lisp is terribly charming, and doesn't subtract from her crisp, enunciated delivery and the wry look of delight on her face as she shares "stories that should be told, because they tell something unusual in a fresh way."

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"We play story songs of linear and narrative natures, ones that are funny and sad, because they are the human experience -- all of it," said Neuwirth during the show.

Neuwirth can vamp with a thick Upper West Side accent as she tells the story of Shirley Devore, the girl who went all the way to Dubrovnik to find the man next door in Kander & Ebb's "Ring Them Bells" (a song that had previously been owned by Liza Minnelli). And although it doesn't suit her fall as well, she can just as easily play the ditzzy showgirl, putting a poutish lilt in her delivery of songs like "Slow Boat to China" and "I Love a Piano," with juicy lyrics like, "I know a fine way to treat a Steinway" (previously owned by Liza's mom, Judy Garland).

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Her peppery delivery of Edith Piaf's "Simply a Waltz" unleashes in her such a joy while she is performing it that it is contagious. The lovely, tinkling piano punctuates her sad, hopeful lyrics as she sings, "Saturday night there's always a dance/ But so far I've never been asked...So I lay awake in bed/ And I let the song run through my head."

She brings a similar passion to Frank Sinatra's "It Only Happens When I Dance With You," singing, "I've danced with dozens of others the whole night through/ but the thrill that comes with spring when anything can happen/ That only happens with you."

She even makes us rethink songs that popular culture has largely written off, like the sadly comic "Mr. Bojangles." Admittedly, Neuwirth's precise diction brings to mind the classic "Saturday Night Live" Ana Gasteyer/Will Ferrell sketches featuring married crooners Marty and Bobbi Culp. But Neuwirth brings to her performances such an earnestness that it elevates her surroundings. When she begins to soft shoe like Bojangles, it makes one wonder about the fate of this poor dancing bum, who pointedly admits from his jail cell, "I drinks a bit."

Perhaps best on her playlist of a dozen-odd songs were selections from storytelling songwriter Tom Waits, including a superior rendition of his "Invitation to the Blues" that embodies the struggle of a drifter who decides to take a chance on love with a lonely waitress.

Although the lineup was very similar to her "Stories with Piano: #3" (there was no #2, she informs

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By Winnie McCroy | May 2
On May 5, The League of Professional Theatre Women will present Award-winning actress Bebe Neuwirth as part of their successful Oral History project.

the crowd), her performance was very well played, from her first sip of Veuve Clicquot to her last bon mot. Fans of cabaret would do well to check out all that this talented performer has to offer.



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"Bebe Neuwirth: Stories With Piano #4" runs through March 23 at 54 Below, 254 W. 54th Street. For information or tickets, call 646-476-3551 or visit www.54Below.com.

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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