

Cabaret Hosts Words: 2023

Introduction

Lisa Appignanesi, in her famous book *The Cabaret*, lists 'an enterprising host' (2004, p.3) as one of the most important features of a cabaret night. She goes on to give a description of cabaret as having 'an ambience of talk and smoke', with no fourth wall, and says that in its original form it was a place for 'chanson', a 'testing ground' for young artists, and had a 'satirical and Avant Garde emphasis'. (Appignanesi 2004, p.5). This essay looks at the role of the host in a cabaret, and seeks to find the key elements needed in a show to make it a cabaret. My final piece on the MA in Theatre and Performance at Northumbria University was a cabaret-style solo show in which I played the host; rather than playing the other characters, I told their stories as the host. If I develop this piece, I would like to go on to play the other characters. I wanted to explore what I would need to include to make it feel like a cabaret to the audience.

The host of the night, originally the owner of the bar, is the character who welcomes the audience in, introduces the acts, and keeps the energy high and the mood exciting throughout the night. Jelavich (1993, p.90) refers to Max Tilke, the host of *The Hungry Pegasus* in 1901, as 'the central figure' and 'conferencier', suggesting that the host has been an integral part of cabaret since its early days.

The Electric Cabaret Company (2019) explains that:

A host's role is to tie the whole night together and engage with the audience. They guide the audience through the night with comedy and interaction. They need to have control, to keep everything on track, running on time and raise excitement levels as they introduce each act. They need to have a strong impact to start the show then warm up the room gradually, but never be intimidating.

This suggests that the host should live up to their name, as if hosting a party. They should make the audience (the guests) feel welcome and they should ensure they have a good night.

Cabaret Shows

I began my research by observing hosts as played by other cabaret artists. I went to see the cabaret act Jinkx Monsoon performing her show *The Ginger Snapped* (2019), and her relationship to the audience was almost that of a confidante. Her stories were intimate but she was unapologetic, confiding in us as if we had known her for years.

I also went to see *Help! I Might be Fabulous!* (2019) by Alfie Ordinary, who again talked to us like old friends. As he came out onto the stage he acted delighted to see us, and as if he could see that we were delighted to see him, and again he confided in us and made us feel special. I tried to emulate this feeling in my own piece by making a clear decision about who, in my mind, the audience were. I decided that they were old friends I loved, and who I knew loved cabaret.

Jinkx and Alfie acted as the hosts for their evenings, as I did. Alfie was alone on stage, while Jinkx had her pianist and composer (and singer at times) Major Scales at the piano. Their shows were both advertised as cabarets, and they contained a series of monologues and songs, combined with direct audience address. Also, they were the ones playing all the roles. Although Jinkx's pianist Major Scales was on stage with her, she was our host and our friend; and Alfie played the piano himself, which was an inspiration to me. I elicited these elements of cabaret from their shows and sought to include them in my own.

Both Alfie and Jinkx had clear stories to tell, and as Fitz-Gerald (2017, p.7) observes, 'The first pitfall many performers fall victim to is they assume a cabaret is simply a collection of songs being sung. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth ... People attend cabarets, whether they realize it or not, to be told a story.'

Both Jinkx and Alfie also wore over-the-top drag-style costumes. Jinkx was in full drag, and Alfie called himself a 'Drag Prince' in that he was a boy playing a boy, in drag make-up; he explained this to us by saying that his 'mother was a drag queen'. In my own show, I wanted my costume to reflect the fact that it was a cabaret, and so I wore full stage make-up with false eyelashes, fishnets and nipple tassels. My use of the tassels was to be in keeping with the style of a cabaret outfit, rather than to have any nudity, but the scene was subverted because the reason the character was revealing herself was because she was breast-feeding. Aston and Harris note that in new burlesque shows, 'women now "control" their own sexuality and can choose whether or not to objectify themselves' (2013, p.143). This was the only moment of any nudity on stage. As Laughlin and Schuler (1995, p. 213) observe, 'in order to change the theatre, we must be able to reject or subvert most of the modes of representation which we have inherited'. Using nipple tassels in a breast-feeding scene shows that the actor (in this case, me) has taken control of when any nudity occurs, and has subverted it by placing it in the most non-sexual scene of the entire play.

Certainly, many of the cabarets I have enjoyed at Lauderdale House on Sunday afternoons (*Cabaret in The House*, 2007) have a very clear story. They are performed by a solo musical theatre actor, talking about their career, the parts they have played and their journey to this point in their career, interspersed with musical theatre songs that either support their story or are from parts they have played. Equally, Sarah Louise Young's cabarets have always followed a narrative – *The Drag King* (1999), for example, was her own story of bisexuality, with classic musical theatre songs throughout, and her most recent cabaret, *An Evening without Kate Bush* (2019), has a clear narrative. I researched Young's performances to find inspiration for my own, and two of the elements of her work I found inspiring were that she writes her own songs, and that she makes fun of herself, but in such a way that the audience are laughing alongside her, not at her. I wanted to incorporate both of these elements into my own cabaret. While Young works with a composer and pianist (similarly, Jinkx Monsoon's pianist composes all of the original songs for her shows, and at times sings them with her), I wanted to write and perform my own songs so that it was a cabaret, but it was also a solo devised piece of theatre. In the

development of the piece I would like to work with a lyricist, as I feel that my strengths are in the musical side of song-writing more than in writing the lyrics.

My cabaret has different stories to tell within one story. The overall story is about looking at the different ways people can experience motherhood (including childlessness), and within that larger story I tell the stories of four mothers. Fitz-Gerald (2017, pp.15–16) writes that ‘If we assume that an actor is brave enough to honestly tell their story on stage, then I believe the actor has the capacity to create a cabaret that showcases individuality ... So long as the subject matter is important to the performer and changed them in some way.’

In line with this understanding of cabaret, I will develop the piece so that I can play the other characters. Because of the nature of cabaret – often involving different performers coming on to perform short acts – it wouldn’t matter that one moment I am talking to the audience as one character and the next I am asking them to believe that I am another character. Fitz-Gerald (2017, p.13) observes that ‘When the audience acknowledges the performer they are admitting (often subconsciously) that this is not a character *in* a story, but rather a person *telling me* a story. This results in the cabaret performer becoming a narrator, as well as a character.’

Weeks, J. (2000, p.164) writes that identities ‘are only ever provisional. We can put on a good performance with them. But we should never believe they are final, or embody some unique truth about ourselves.’ Audiences will accept one actor playing a range of characters, and coming in and out of the action to speak to them.

Cabaret and Audience

All of the cabaret shows I have seen have included direct audience address – not necessarily the whole way through, but certainly plenty when the performer is ‘playing host’. I would like to develop my skills in this further, and plan to attend Boal workshops looking at the role of the joker. I don’t want the cabaret to be forum theatre, but I would like to have the feeling of intimacy with the audience and the confidence to interact with them. I also have observed that this should be completely

within my boundaries, and that the style and mood of the night must be set by me. The cabaret is a piece of theatre and it is vital that I know what I want to achieve. Boal says of the joker character:

The Forum is a Space of Liberty and the Joker is the person who must assure the exercise of this liberty. She has the function of organising the theatrical debate, clarifying – by means of questions and the exposition of her own perception, which should not be hidden – the meaning of each intervention. (Boal 2006, p.126)

I would like to study the role of the joker as a way to develop my confidence in having real conversations with the audience and responding to them, potentially off-script, but not in order to create forum-style theatre. Freshwater (2009, p.31) considers the ‘audience members’ desire to interact with performers’, and I could indulge this by building my own confidence in this area.

Freshwater (2009, p.31) also observes that ‘the theatre industry is attempting to develop a more nuanced understanding of audiences’. This could partly be motivated by financial interest: in order to get audiences to attend the theatre, we need to show them work they are interested in. It is also important to keep up to date with trends and movements – for example, being aware of changes in vocabulary such as using ‘Good evening, everybody’ (the words I begin my piece with) rather than the traditional ‘Ladies and gentlemen’, which excludes non-binary people. However, an art form such as cabaret arises because the performers have something to say, politics to react to and ideas to share. Under this heading, the cabaret is about what the performers want to say, and while audience preferences should be considered they should not be the overriding factor in what makes the show. It is also more satisfying as a writer and performer to give the audience a show they could never have dreamt of, and that no amount of marketing and finding out about their interests could have generated.

Conclusion

My piece, *The Mother's Cabaret*, incorporated many elements of cabaret, including costume, direct audience address, song, live music, comedy and a hint of burlesque. Moving forward, it needs more of a narrative, a director, and more character work. Therefore, I would like to end with the blurb for the development of this piece of work and what I hope it will become:

The Lipstick Kabarett

Paris 1881. A cabaret is born. And where are all the women? Hear the stories of female cabaret artists as they navigate a life of oppression, wartime and cabaret through Europe, from the arrival of cabaret in Paris to the present day. Accompanied by live music and original songs, Jenni Winter draws you into an intimate world of 'poor' stages and sets, rich with songs, sketches and satire: a world where women will wear what they like, do as they please and refuse to be silenced!

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Performances

Cabaret in the House. 2007. Hosted by Tim McArthur. Lauderdale House, Highgate.

The Drag King. 1999. Written and performed by Sarah Louise Young. Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

An Evening without Kate Bush. 2019. Written and performed by Sarah Louise Young. Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

The Ginger Snapped. 2019. Written and performed by Jinkx Monsoon. Northern Stage.

Help! I Might Be Fabulous! 2019. Written and performed by Alfie Ordinary. Sage Gateshead.