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Monday Night Live: A tiny cabaret with big surprises

On Monday nights, stars and wannabes take an often impromptu bow in the Loop

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Monday nights in the Loop would be a lot less lively if it weren't for "Monday Night Live."

The popular series marked its fifth anniversary in September, and judging by the most recent installment, the concept still has plenty of life in it.

At around 7:30 p.m. each Monday, emcee-singer Denise McGowan Tracy steps to the front of the tiny stage in the show room at the back of Petterino's, on North Dearborn Street, and welcomes everyone to "an impromptu musical showcase." The term has been carefully chosen to avoid the much less desirable "open mic" – and all the amateurism that phrase implies.

Though it's true that some of the "singers" who stepped up this time around were not ready for prime time (or any time), the best of them represented the pinnacle of the art of cabaret in Chicago.



Morgan Brown, a Southland College Prep Charter High School junior from Matteson, performing at Monday Night Live at Petterino's restaurant. (Nuccio DiNuzzo/Chicago Tribune)

None more than a vocal ensemble that calls itself TreDiva. The threesome lived up to its name, in that each singer showed enough personality and vocal chops to hold the stage alone. Put them in front of a trio of microphones, let "Monday Night Live" pianist Beckie Menzie cut loose at the keyboard and you had the makings of an indelible performance.

It didn't take more than a few notes of George Gershwin's "Summertime" to recognize the classical training of singers Elizabeth Norman, Anisha McFarland and Jonita Lattimore. That can be both a virtue and a vice in music from "Porgy and Bess," which requires impeccable technique, phrasing and diction but also a slightly more relaxed approach to rhythm and phrase than classical orthodoxy allows.

TreDiva understood that, unfurling an ingenious vocal arrangement of "Summertime" in which one line often echoed the next, the singers reveling in the lush harmonies they produced. When they completed the aria – or seemed to – they received a noisy, richly deserved ovation, but they weren't quite done with Gershwin yet. Switching to swing-based rhythm and blues-tinged melody, TreDiva took "Summertime" toward the realm of jazz. In so doing, they reminded listeners that Gershwin strode the line between high art and populism, between operatic singing art and folkloric expression more successfully than any American composer before or since.

And, yes, TreDiva followed that up with "Dreamgirls," sung not as if they were in a Broadway-size house, which obviously they weren't, but with an intimacy suited to the room and the occasion. No wonder they closed the evening's first set. Who would want to go on immediately after them?

Pianist-vocalist Menzie stands – or, actually, sits – at the heart of "Monday Night Live." Her ability to improvise an accompaniment for singers she often hasn't met, and in music she often hasn't seen before, remains something to behold. Some vocalists arrive on stage, call the tune and start singing, without informing Menzie of technicalities – such as what key they'll be singing in.

"You never really know what's going to happen," said Menzie, a model of grace under pressure, after the show. Yet she generally finds the right notes in the nick of time.

Though Menzie played nimbly for all the volunteers, she showed her high-end work accompanying Chicago singer Tom Michael. In truth, this was less an accompaniment than a partnership, for Michael and Menzie have been touring the country – and playing Chicago – together for years. And it shows.

Their duet in a cleverly constructed medley of "With a Song in My Heart" and "Without a Song" stretched melodic lines practically to the breaking point. Michaels sang with plenty of heat and urgency, while Menzie's vocals provided sensitive, smoldering contrast. Duo singing in this repertoire does not come much more elegant than this.

Vocalist Hilary Ann Feldman, who's much newer to the scene, also ranks as a cabaret pro, and she has a flair for comic songs with a lot of heart underneath. The tune "Gimme, Gimme" – about a protagonist who's greedy for love – enabled Feldman to simultaneously portray and satirize the emotionally needy among us. Once she reached the finale, though, she dropped the comic mannerisms and tore into the song's climax with gusto. Here's a singer who's not afraid of making a big statement and has the vocal firepower to pull it off.

Another singer relatively new to Chicago cabaret, Abigail Riccards, showed an uncommonly sweet tone, a wise way with a lyric and some fine scat singing in "On the Sunny Side of the Street." She dipped and swooned a bit much in some of her phrasing, but her big-and-brassy finish made up for it.

And perhaps only at "Monday Night Live" would a student who had just won the August Wilson Monologue Competition next door at the Goodman Theatre reprise her triumphant soliloquy. Morgan Brown, of Southland College Prep, was celebrating her triumph with her family when emcee Tracy shrewdly invited her up to the stage. Without flinching, Brown gave a haunting, surprisingly mature reading of a passage from August Wilson's "King Hedley II," the inflections of her voice and pacing of her delivery as musical as anything performed on this evening. Eyes were moist all around.

Moments like that make "Monday Night Live" a tradition to be cherished in the Loop. Granted, some of the singers displayed more guts than talent, more heart than skill. Some of this work really should be confined to individual showers.

More inspiring, though, were those singers who haven't yet mastered the art but clearly showed promise. Tovah Hicks brought palpable affection to Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Dindi," but what was the hurry? This music needs to breathe. And Cynthia Clarey offered a creamy tone and worldly wisdom in "There's Still a Little Starch Left," though she needs to taper her vibrato.

There cannot be many American cities, however, in which so much local talent shows up to sing for the compensation of one cocktail (plus a T-shirt for first-timers) and maintains as high an artistic level as the top performers on this night.

Cabaret may rightly be known as the most fragile art, but "Monday Night Live" surely helps sustain it.

"Monday Night Live" starts at 7:30 p.m. Mondays; the show will be dark on March 18 but will resume on March 25; no cover, but \$15 food/bar minimum; reservations recommended; at Petterino's, 150 N. Dearborn St.; 312-422-0150 or petterinos.com.

Frank Rosaly's experiment

Chicago drummer-bandleader Frank Rosaly most frequently can be heard in the city's more adventurous music clubs, but this weekend he'll emerge in an intriguing new context.

He'll improvise a kind of duet with Shawn Decker's sound installation "Prairie" at the Chicago Cultural Center, Rosaly responding to Decker's sonic environment in real time. Considering the acuity of Rosaly's technique and the breadth of his imagination, the results could be rewarding. Certainly no one knows exactly what will happen, including Rosaly. Which is precisely the idea.

Frank Rosaly and "Prairie" runs from 7 to 8 p.m. Saturday in the Sidney R. Yates Gallery of the Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St.; free; 312-744-3316 or chicagoculturalcenter.org.

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