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Making Certain No Emotion Is Left Hidden



MICHELLE V. AGINS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alan Cumming Sings Sappy Songs in an opening-night performance on Tuesday at Café Carlyle.

I have admired Alan Cumming since first seeing him in the 1998 Broadway revival of “Cabaret.” Who was this exotic, androgynous provocateur and pansexual pied piper brazenly flirting with audience members without losing his composure? He was scary and irresistible.

STEPHEN HOLDEN

MUSIC REVIEW

Nothing, however, prepared me for the emotional firestorm that Mr. Cumming detonated at Tuesday’s opening-night performance of his nightclub show “Alan Cumming Sings Sappy Songs,” at Café Carlyle. “Have a hankie ready,” he advised early in the evening while flashing a subversive Mephistophelean grin whose message read: You know and I know that underneath our decorum, we’re all ravenous sexual beasts and hooray for that!

The show amped up an aspect of Mr. Cumming that in the past he has parceled out more cautiously: his deeper personal feelings. Mr. Cumming, who will co-host the Tony Awards with Kristin Chenoweth on Sunday, tore into angry, bitter songs associated with performers as diverse as Annie Lennox, Elaine Stritch and Rufus Wainwright, delivered passionately and with tremendous theatrical authority. Behind Mr. Cumming was an excellent trio led by his musical director, pianist and sometime collaborator, Lance

“Alan Cumming Sings Sappy Songs” continues through June 13 at Café Carlyle, 35 West 76th Street, Manhattan; 212-744-1600, thecarlyle.com.

Horne, that included Eleanor Norton on cello and Chris Jeco on drums.

Mr. Cumming, 50, has grown into a formidable all-around entertainer on the level of Hugh Jackman or his friend and sometime mentor Liza Minnelli in her glory days. Like few performers, he is completely at home onstage and fearless in dredging up personal family traumas addressed in his 2014 memoir, “Not My Father’s Son,” with warmth and insight.

The evening began with a strong, anguished rendition of Ms. Lennox’s song “Why” from her album “Diva” and continued with the Keane ballad “Somewhere Only We Know.” “You, You, You” from the Broadway show “The Visit” was snatched out of its singsongy niche and became a song about romantic obsession. Mr. Wainwright’s beautiful “Dinner at 8,” a reflection on father-son strife, was laid bare.

On a humorous note, a Stephen Sondheim mash-up “No One Is Alive While I’m Around” located the composer’s recurrent musical tropes. A similar medley of hits by Katy Perry, Lady Gaga and Adele identified similar patterns in contemporary pop. At the same time, his rendition of Adele’s “Someone Like You” dug up the song’s heartbroken essence.

The evening crested with a one-two punch: Noël Coward’s wistful “If Love Were All,” and “The Ladies Who Lunch,” delivered with a fury that eclipsed even Ms. Stritch’s classic interpretation. In the underpopulated arena of male cabaret singers, Mr. Cumming may be the only one with the talent and drive to change its direction.