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## THE Arts

### Why Settle for a Song? Let's Add Some Theater

In "Plays With Music," the title of Brian Stokes Mitchell's theatrically far-reaching show at Café Carlyle in Manhattan, the operative word is "plays." When not

**STEPHEN  
HOLDEN**

**MUSIC  
REVIEW**

inhabiting a role onstage, this most traditionally heroic of Broadway leading men reimagines songs as one-act plays performed with a child-like enthusiasm.

If a number like "Getting Married Today," from "Company," involves multiple characters, he'll shift from one to another. The heart of the song, of course, is the bride-to-be's hysterical (and hysterically funny) last-minute case of wedding jitters, sung at breakneck speed and without a hitch. But a routinely overlooked participant in that song is the dour church lady who oversees the ceremony and slips in barbed remarks disparaging marriage. At Tuesday's opening-night show, Mr. Mitchell made her an important character by scrunching his features into a comic mask of ill will and spewing out sentiments like, "Bless this day, tragedy of life, husband yoked to wife."

Mr. Mitchell was accompanied by a trio led by Tedd Firth on piano, with Gary Haase on bass and Mark McLean on drums. Their innovative arrangements, which Mr. Mitchell sometimes joined on melodica, went out of their way to steer clear of musical clichés.

The set led off with a rendition of "There's No Business Like Show Business" that took pains to avoid sounding like a communal rah-rah celebration. It was followed by "Gesticulate," an amusing paean to the power of theatrical body language from

*Brian Stokes Mitchell continues through Sept. 26 at Café Carlyle, Manhattan; 212-744-1600, [thecarlyle.com](http://thecarlyle.com).*

"Kismet," which Mr. Mitchell physically illustrated as he sang.

Mr. Mitchell has long shown a remarkable ability to throw off his matinee idol glamour, regress and convey the wide-eyed wonder of an adoring parent gazing through the eyes of a young son or daughter, or vice versa. In "A Wizard Everyday," a playful Halloween song by Liz Suggs and Nikko Benson, he fused two personas.

In almost every song, Mr. Mitchell played a different role. "The Man I Love" swelled in intensity from shy uncertainty into an impatient demand for true love, as he played a gay man emboldened by marriage equality. "Hello, Young Lovers" was sung from the viewpoint of Mr. Mitchell's father, who recently died at 94, looking back near the end of his life at two happy marriages.

The set was not without its nods to the fading archetype of the dominant Broadway lead. A stern "If Ever I Would Leave You," from "Camelot," was swoon-worthy in the old-fashioned Broadway style.

Although Mr. Mitchell prefers voices of hope and humanity, he can go dark. He surgically removed any hint of sentimentality from the Schwartz-Dietz standard "By Myself," which was attached to the most bitter and sarcastic version I've heard of Jerry Herman's "I Won't Send Roses."

A crowning moment was Mr. Mitchell's rendition of the Brazilian composer Ivan Lins's "Começar de Novo," sung in Portuguese but better known here as "The Island," outfitted with soft-core English lyrics by Alan and Marilyn Bergman. In Portuguese, the sentiments are enigmatic and questioning, and a gorgeous samba-flavored arrangement enhanced the mystique.



MICHELLE V. AGINS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Brian Stokes Mitchell reimagines songs as one-act theatrical productions in his show "Plays With Music" at Café Carlyle.