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REVIEWS

Brian Stokes Mitchell: *Plays With Music*

The *Shuffle Along* star makes his Café Carlyle debut.

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Brian Stokes Mitchell stars in *Plays With Music*, backed up by pianist Tedd Firth and bassist Gary Haase, at Café Carlyle.

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This year marks the 60th anniversary season at [Café Carlyle](#), the Upper East Side supper club that has been a favorite venue for the likes of Bobby Short, Elaine Stritch, and Woody Allen. It seems only fitting that it would open with a new show by one of Broadway's foremost leading men, Brian Stokes Mitchell, who makes his Carlyle debut with *Plays With Music*. It's an evening of big-hearted musical virtuosity, guaranteed to delight.

Mitchell is the star of the original Broadway production of *Ragtime* as well as the revivals of *Kiss Me, Kate* (for which he won a Tony Award) and *Man of La Mancha*. He is set to reunite with his *Ragtime* costar Audra McDonald in next year's highly anticipated *Shuffle Along*, based on the popular 1921 musical revue. His stint at the

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Carlyle is the perfect opportunity to see him perform in an intimate space, a rare thing for a man accustomed to playing giant symphony halls and Broadway houses.

Mitchell enters the dining room singing Irving Berlin's classic ode to the stage, "There's No Business Like Show Business." He employs a fluid, constantly changing style on this opener: at first it's staccato, then undergirded by a Latin beat, then jazzier — an apt introduction to a performer who is not afraid to synthesize his eclectic musical tastes to create something surprising and new.

Looking very much like a lost member of the Rat Pack, Mitchell wears a simple pinstripe suit and a paisley white tie. His harlequin socks, however, suggest a performer not too cool to clown around: His second number, "Gesticulate" from *Kismet*, is irreverent and magical as Mitchell waves his arms around like a musical wizard. His interpretation of Liz Suggs and Nikko Benson's "A Wizard Every Day," about an angry trick-or-treater, is equally hilarious and endearing as it draws out the specific imagery in Suggs' lyrics.

Perhaps most startling is Mitchell's mastery of show tunes that were originally written for women. He performs a glowing version of the Gershwins' "The Man I Love," improvising on the melodica (a breath-controlled keyboard) during the interlude. His final note is sheer ecstasy. This leads into Sondheim's manic "Getting Married Today," sung from the perspective of a nervous bride. It's one of the most difficult patter songs ever written for the musical theater, but Mitchell nails every syllable in one of the most well-acted renditions I've ever seen. He calms things down with Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Hello, Young Lovers" (sung by Anna in *The King and I*), which he dedicates to his recently passed father. Mitchell's resonant baritone grounds the wistful qualities of the song in what feels like an ancient wisdom.

Mitchell's set list extends beyond Broadway. He offers a graceful version of the Scottish folk song "The Water Is Wide," stealing a moment with his wife (actress Allyson Tucker) on the lyrics "my love and I." With perfectly pronounced Portuguese, he sings Ivan Lins' beautiful and mellow "Começar de Novo." Most impressively, he synthesizes Michael Legrand's "The Windmills of Your Mind" with Bach's "Prelude in C Minor." The effect is haunting, with Tedd Firth burning up the Carlyle's Yamaha with his baroque piano skills.

Mitchell takes to the ivories himself as he sings Pete Seger's "Odds On Favorite," nonchalantly rattling off Yip Harburg's lyrics, which are simultaneously cataclysmic and blasé: "Astronomers predict someday / Our own sun will blaze away; / They'll be a glorious display / Of sunburst helium masses." He's reminiscent of Noël Coward or Cole Porter in this moment: a talented, witty, urbane man behind the piano to whom we could listen all night. Of course, like any good showman, Mitchell leaves us wanting more. So does Café Carlyle, which is still creating unforgettable nights 60 years on.