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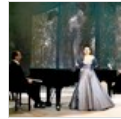
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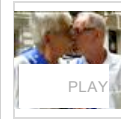
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Taking Turns Tapping the Tenor of Sondheim

Monday's edition of the monthly Sondheim Unplugged program was the event's 16th, and its one-year anniversary. Thanks to the man of honor, there's never a dearth of material.

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By WILL FRIEDWALD

"Anyone Can Whistle" has always seemed like one of Steven Sondheim's most pleasant and least complicated songs—it's often performed on all-Sondheim programs as a respite from heavier arias, like most of "Sweeney Todd" or "Passion." But at Sondheim Unplugged at the Laurie Beechman Theatre on Monday, Len Cariou made it clear what a deceptively complex piece it is. "What's hard is simple," the lyric goes, "what's natural comes hard." The act of "whistling" becomes a metaphor for the difficult act of fully living life, showing that "being free" is something that has to be learned. In Mr. Cariou's practiced hands, "Anyone Can Whistle" is a song about being alive, no less so, in fact, than "Being Alive."



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Alan Nahigian

Trent Armand Kendall performed at Sondheim Unplugged at the Laurie Beechman Theatre on Monday.

It made it doubly effective that when host and producer Phil Bond introduced Mr. Cariou, everyone in the house braced themselves for of the big, scary numbers like Sweeney Todd's "Epiphany," which Mr. Cariou introduced in the original 1979 production. There's no other context in the theater or cabaret community where his newly rethought "Whistle" could have worked so well.

Monday's edition of the monthly Sondheim Unplugged program was the event's 16th, and its one-year anniversary. "At the time of Sondheim's 80th birthday, all of New York

erupted into Sondheim mania, and I was swept right up in it myself," said Mr. Bond, who has run the Beechman Theatre for the last five years. "I went to see the big gala concert at City Center, and it was fantastic, with a huge orchestra, very exciting. But I thought, 'Wouldn't it be interesting if we just pared everything down, and concentrated on the music and lyrics?'"

Sondheim Unplugged was initially conceived as a four-week series, but Mr. Bond said that the immediate enthusiastic response propelled it into an ongoing monthly event at the Beechman, allowing him to enlist special guests. And of course, there's never a dearth of material. "There's nobody quite as prolific as Sondheim," he said. "There are hundreds of options for singers to choose from. Second, I'm just one of those Sondheim nuts. I grew up mowing my lawn in Indiana listening to 'Into the Woods' on my walkman!"

While Mr. Bond would love to bring in headliners like Bernadette Peters, he's expended more energy showcasing original Sondheim cast members. At Monday's installment of the series (16

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performances is actually more than a few of Mr. Sondheim's flops ran on Broadway) there were three singers who originated roles in "Sweeney Todd." Both Ken Jennings's "Not While I'm Around" and Sarah Rice's "Greenfinch & Linnet Bird" were heavy handkerchief moments. Generally, most of his performers hail from the worlds of musical theater or cabaret.

Mr. Bond's enthusiasm is the driving force behind each show, as evidenced by his generous dispersal of theater trivia: For example, one of Mr. Sondheim's most iconic songs, "Finishing the Hat," was actually sung for the first time in the space that is now the Laurie Beechman; in 1984, the future theater was merely a basement with a piano that the producers of "Sunday in the Park With George" were using as a rehearsal space.

What also becomes apparent in this extended deconstruction of the Sondheim canon is the way the composer, who is now 81 years old, uses various elements, both musical and emotional. At Monday's show, for instance, it was impossible to miss Mr. Sondheim's use of hysteria, and the heightened contrast between vindictive rage (Julie Reeburn doing "Leave You," from "Follies"), extreme emotional agitation for comic purposes (Kristy Cates's "Getting Married Today," from "Company") and, just the opposite, the kind of tragic, extreme pathological, psychotic craziness that leads to murder (Rob Maitner and Harris Doran delving into the dark side on "The Ballad of Guiteau," from "Assassins").

In showing how the songs relate to each other, even between various shows, and helping us hear them in new ways, Sondheim Unplugged is creating something entirely new and worthwhile. It has, in fact, given us a hat, where there never was a hat.

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