

CABARETSCENES

**YOUR
NIGHTCLUB
GUIDE**

**JAN/FEB
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**Frank
DAIN**

**Raissa
KATONA
BENNETT**

**Brian
DE LORENZO**

**41
Cabaret
REVIEWS**



Frank Dain

Musical By Design

By **Barbara Leavy**



Only some

who read and enjoy *Cabaret Scenes* realize that the major work of getting out ten issues a year is done by one person, Frank Dain, who writes some of it, keeps track of all of it, and gets everything ready for the creative director and printer. Simply put, without Frank Dain, no *Cabaret Scenes*. Even fewer readers know that Frank is a cabaret performer, someone who set out for a degree in art education, but attained instead a B. A. in Theater Arts. Art and music have intersected and diverged throughout Frank's life, but as editor-in-chief of *Cabaret Scenes*, he is able to draw on both. As he works on his upcoming Johnny Mathis show, it seems the right time to learn more about him.

Barbara Tell us about yourself.

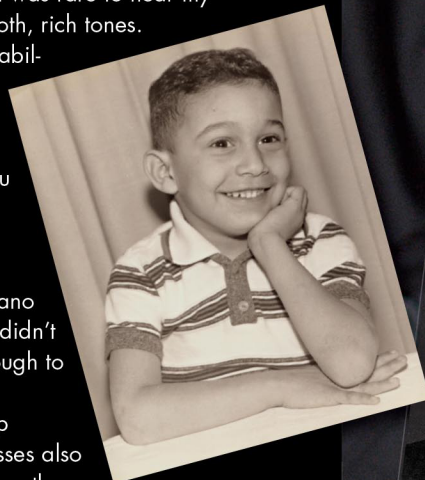
Frank I was born and raised in Akron, Ohio, the oldest of five children. We were a typical extended, working-class Italian-American family. My parents worked hard and we were well provided for, but buying records was not one of our luxuries. We did have the soundtrack to *The Sound*

of Music, but what self-respecting Catholic family didn't?! Still, our home was filled with live music, because my mom played piano for singers who came to the house to rehearse. She also played for church and school events. Both my parents have nice voices, but it was rare to hear my father's smooth, rich tones.

My musical ability comes from both sides.

BL Were you involved in music at an early age?

FD I took piano lessons, but didn't practice enough to warrant the expense. Tap dancing classes also ceased. My mother says that, again, I didn't practice enough. My memory is that I didn't want to wear black pants and a gold shirt at a recital.



Opposite page
The innocent FD
in bygone day
Center
The (decadent) MC
in *Cabaret*

Heather Sullivan

Later, in college I had no qualms about appearing in a blonde wig, silver high heels, and fishnet stockings! To backtrack, I loved being an altar boy

At right (from top)
Frank Dain
as much yours as Mime

Frank with Ron Caley
in *Godspell*

As King Herod
in *Jesus Christ Superstar*

And as Oberon
in *A Midsummer*
Night's Dream

As Hysterium in
Forum

Opposite page
Frank as Claudio in
Much Ado
About Nothing

As Tulsa in *Gypsy*

Kathleen Landis
with Frank

Frank flanked by
Barbara & Peter Leavy

With the man who fits the
Bill Sensenbrenner

And with mic

in grade school, the ritual and the incense, what I now realize was an early theatrical experience. But I was and am basically shy and at that time, dreaded having to sing a solo.

BL Clearly a singing career wasn't in your plans. Tell us about your interest in art.

FD As a kid, I spent a lot of time drawing. A sixth grade teacher, Sr. Vonda, was an artist and one of the kindest persons I've known. She took me under her wing and helped me develop my talent. In high school, another terrific art teacher, Ms. Frye, gave me a lot of extra attention. My plan was to get a degree in art education.

BL Then art and music always combined in your life?



and so I got involved in the drama club. I designed posters and programs. But only choir members could be in musicals and, at that time, I had no interest in singing.

BL So how did music and theater overtake art?

FD For two years I studied art at the University of Akron. I joined the school's Experimental Theatre Company so I could be involved with props, costumes, scenery and other art projects. Then I auditioned for a student revue in which I played different characters and danced in a few numbers. At the year-end awards ceremony,

I won for Best Supporting Actor and, when I came home, I found my family had pinned a paper-towel banner over the kitchen sink saying,

"Congratulations to

our Oscar Winner!" But theater was still an extra-curricular activity.

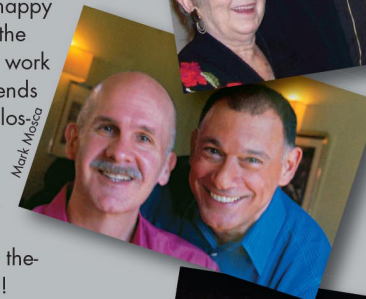
BL What changed?

FD The theater department announced its 1974 production would be *Cabaret*. I loved the film and Joel Grey and fantasized about playing The Emcee. But that role went to a senior as his thesis project.

Over the summer, he chose another topic and the role became available.

There were better singers, dancers, and actors at the audition, so I was happy but shocked to get the role. Then the hard work began. The Emcee ends the show and, on closing night, I walked off the stage and broke down. It was a very emotional experience. But the theater bug had bitten!

That year, I won another award for Best Supporting Actor. I was only 21, living a sheltered life, hardly the background for The Emcee. But when we're young performers, we take more chances, which seem more daunting when we get older. Anyway, I played many roles and also won a Best Actor award (*Hysterium in Forum*). So I switched majors and ended up with a B. A. in Theater Arts.



in *Gypsy*, I listened to what I consider one of the best overtures in musical theater played by a full orchestra. It sent chills down my spine. There is nothing like being on stage with a full orchestra in the pit. Anyway, after a tearful parting from my family, I headed for New York. It was dark when I flew over the city, a nightscape my first glimpse of my new home.

BL Then what?
FD After graduation, I was in a children's theater company, taught pantomime at the university's night school and did three musicals for a community theater. When I played Tulsa

How did she influence your career?

FD It is because of Barbra that I ever opened my mouth to sing. And it's because of her attention to telling a story that I recognized the importance of lyrics. After seeing the film *Funny Girl*,

I immersed myself in all things Streisand. The cousin who lent me the soundtrack had to wrestle it out of my hands to get it back. Later, I bought her *Live Concert at the Forum*, and played it on my recently purchased stereo, which I actually named "Barbra"! I sang along with her, but if there is one thing she teaches, it is that you have to do things your own way.

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Frank Dain

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BL So you decided to become a singer?

FD Not right away. I initially thought I would become a chorus boy in New York (ah, if I had kept up those tap classes!). I knew I needed to improve my voice. My third teacher, Veronica Burke, asked me one day what, if I could do anything with my singing, that would be. I replied, "I'd sing a bunch of great songs in a small club. Just me,

I loved being an altar boy in grade school, the ritual and the incense, what I now realize was an early theatrical experience.

a piano and a microphone."

"That's it!" she shouted. She had thought my voice too special for a chorus boy. "Now I know what kind of work we need to do."

My first gig was in 1982 at a venue called Jason's Park Royal. No thrill I had ever experienced compared to my response to that first cabaret show, in which I rediscovered an artistic freedom I thought I had lost. I loved the closeness of the audience and discovered I needn't hide behind a character. I could just tell the story, keeping the lyrics in the forefront while I improved vocally.

BL Where else did you perform?



FD I continued at the Park Royal. I performed at Steve McGraw's (now The Triad) with Philip Fortenberry as my musical director. I wanted to be taken seriously, but I also wanted to have fun, so I did some crazy things. I loved the Louis Prima hit, "Josephina, Please No Leana



on the Bell," and I created an old Italian lady who sang the song. I think it succeeded because I surprised the audience with my costume.



I didn't give up on her for the longest time and, believe it or not, I invented her a husband, Al Dente. They followed me to Don't Tell Mama.

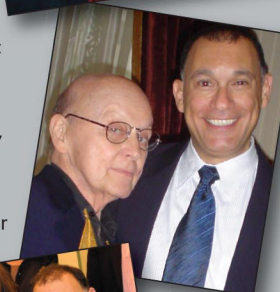
Eventually I dropped comedy for a new show at Danny's Skylight Room, which was overloaded with medleys. I owe Roy Sander a big thank you for a negative review, for it pushed me to do another show quickly, this one a



tribute to Nat King Cole. That led to Donald Smith's inviting me to sing at the Mabel Mercer Foundation's summer Cabaret Convention, *Grand Nights for Singing* at The Town Hall in 1995.

BL Then what happened?

FD I began to work with Rick Jensen as a new musical director and he encouraged me not to do a show about another person (such as Nat King Cole) until I was better known as myself. Rick knows the Great American Songbook, but his background is pop and he introduced me to new songs and to new ways of singing the standards. He suggested Lisa Asher as a director and another show was born. I returned to Don't Tell Mama, finally becoming the singer I wanted to be.



Reviewers used the term "crooner" to describe me, and there were comparisons with Mathis, Sinatra and Damone. I will never forget Roy Sander's



face after one of the shows. The improvement since the last show he saw had him beaming.

BL How did your CD evolve?

FD I started working with a new voice teacher, Kurt Peterson, who built on what I learned from Veronica, helping me expand my vocal ability, adding to my confidence. He remains a good friend and trusted advisor. Then Rick, Lisa and I worked on a new show about taking chances, *Let Yourself Go!* I had recently quit my day job and decided to concentrate

Opposite page (from top)
Julie Wilson with Frank
Tim Di Pasqua
Neil Sedaka
Jim Van Slyke & Frank

FD, Terese Genecco & Bill Sensenbrenner

Anna Bergman & FD

Frank

Marieann Meringolo & Rick Jensen

This page

Baby Jane Dexter

FD & Marilyn Maye

FD, Barbara Fasano

Eric Comstock

John Wallowitch & FD

Kathleen Landis

Amy Ash

Linda Amiel Burns

Alice Hammerstein-Mathias & FD

Sunday Brunch show as part of his *CabFest* in Provincetown, Mass. And Donald Smith asked me to participate in the first-ever Cabaret Convention in Philadelphia.

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BL What happened to art in the meantime?

FD When I quit my day job in 1999, I started my own business as a graphic designer. That would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of my partner, Bill. We're together twenty-three years this month.

My first clients then, as is true now, were cabaret performers. I've also provided designs for a few Off-Broadway productions, thanks to my friendship with Kurt Peterson.

It was my design work that led to my most important musical collaboration

and friendship, with Kathleen Landis. I designed a brochure for her and gave her my CD. She asked me to sing with her at the Café Pierre for the anniversary party of Millie and Peter Hanson, an event we subsequently repeated. I loved the Café Pierre and lament that it no longer exists. Kathleen had worked there for twenty-one years, and she is an expert at reading a room and making immediate adjustments. I like to be more in control and she taught me to let some of that go. Kathleen has been extremely generous in sharing her time and talent and has included me in some paying gigs. Because of her generosity, I'm able to return to cabaret.

BL Before we talk about your upcoming new show with Kathleen, tell us how you got involved with *Cabaret Scenes*.

FD One day, I received a call from Darrell Henline, whose assistant was leaving and had to be replaced. I took the bus to New Jersey to the office, which was also the home of Darrell and Keith Meritz. It was a commute I was to continue for a long time, mainly immersed in the magazine's paper work. When Darrell died in 2003, I expected the magazine to close, but Keith decided to keep it going and suddenly



Heather Sullivan

I was the editor. Later, Peter Leavy took over as publisher, and I was editor-in-chief with more say in the actual design and content of the magazine. The worlds of art and of music came together in my new role.

BL How has your being a performer affected your being editor-in-chief?

FD I bring a performer's perspective to the magazine. I stress the importance of paying attention to the lesser-knowns in cabaret so that they can become better known. It is now our policy and one about which we are constantly reminding our writers. We all can be star-struck, but I always felt too much attention went to the big "names" and to the fancier venues in which they play.

BL What are the satisfactions that you get from being editor-in-chief?

FD I am very close to the cabaret community, see a lot of shows, and enjoy some terrific performances. This past July, Stu Hamstra/*Cabaret Hotline Online* presented me with the Jeff Matson Award for my work as a performer, designer and writer, which I don't think would have happened had I not been editor-in-chief. I had a chance to sing at the awards ceremony, heard by many who didn't know

I was a performer.

My position has also brought me new design clients. And I am very pleased when people tell me how much they like the magazine, its look, its content, the coverage we now extend outside New York. As editor, I am on David Kenney's WBAL radio show, *Everything Old Is New Again*, one Sunday a month discussing the newest issue of the magazine and playing recordings of performers featured in the issue. I like being on the radio; David is so easy to talk with and we have a good rapport.

BL What contributions does the magazine make to the cabaret community?

FD The reviews, sometimes as many as fifty, are a unique source of information. Our feature stories and interviews not only allow those involved in cabaret shows to discuss their careers but indirectly allow them to teach new performers. The magazine also provides an outlet for performers to advertise, achieving name recognition. An ad is a long-term investment in a career. And our performing readers enjoy reading about each other.

If we had the budget, The Cabaret Foundation could bring cabaret to the schools, offer seminars and master classes, and hold an annual Hall of Fame induction ceremony. I could hire a grant writer to help us realize all these possibilities.

BL Finally, tell us about your new show.

FD I once sang a few Mathis songs and found they suited me. So, when I started working with Kathleen, I resurrected an early idea of a Mathis show.

Mathis himself is still performing on recordings and in concerts. I'm not interested in replicating his arrangements. I am interested in presenting the songs in a way that will make people hear them differently. I've also discovered some terrific lyrics that deserve

more attention. I think Mathis is the finest romantic singer we've ever had. When we think of "Misty," "Chances Are," "Wonderful, Wonderful"—to name but a few—we think "Mathis." And what would Christmas be without his recordings of classic Christmas songs?

We'll do the show at the Metropolitan Room in February and March, including many familiar Mathis songs as well as less-well-known ones I found intriguing as I listened through his catalogue. Saadi Zain will be on bass. Lennie Watts is directing. In our few rehearsals, we have experienced a good, mutually respectful relationship, with creative ideas flowing freely.

I think this is the perfect vehicle for me to get back into cabaret. I enjoy singing these songs, telling these stories, and passing along some of Johnny's history. ○

Note:

Frank will be at the Metropolitan Room in NYC Feb. 20, 27 and March 6 at 7 pm. In April, he will be in Chicago at Stage 773 presented by Ralph Lampkin Music Group on its 30th anniversary. Visit www.frankdain.com