

About Theater

Bickford's 'Singing Lessons' were lessons well learned — and taught

By ALLEN CROSSET
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Like a sparkling snowflake on a puppy's nose, "Singing Lessons" didn't last long but it was sweet while it lasted. In the midst of the season's often frantic hustle and bustle, when there is never enough time for shopping and parties and decorating the tree, the Bickford Theatre at the Morris Museum for just two weekends offered a very clever and most satisfying evening of song.

"Singing Lessons," a Bickford cabaret, is an original show, conceived, produced and directed by Walker Joyce, and composed of familiar and not-so-familiar songs which each contain some sort of lesson. Joyce also sang several numbers, including a playful piece

about baseball and the kid who bats last and gets stuck in the right field where he watches dandelions grow.

In addition to Joyce, four men and four women provided a solid two hours of musical excellence. Some members of the ensemble were familiar, like Will Lampe and Faith Anderson, who both starred in the Bickford's winning production of "She Loves Me." Others, including Jon Darios, Glenn Klein and Ignacio Cruz Jr., were new but hopefully will all return soon.

The ensemble worked from four small cabaret tables placed at the front of the stage. Against a blue backdrop accented with stars, a five-piece combo, led by pianist

Peter Candela, provided the robust musical accompaniment.

Candela also created the musical arrangements, and they are noteworthy. At the beginning of the show, for example, in a section called "Lessons from Childhood," the ensemble sang four children's songs — "Old McDonald," "Itsy Bitsy Spider," "The Alphabet Song" and "This Old Man" — then weaved them all together into a madrigal-like texture that simply astonished.

At the end of the first act, the singers gathered at the front of the stage to sing "You'll Never Walk Alone." At the end of the show, they sang "I Believe." Both songs were performed a cappella and in exquisitely tight harmony.

In addition to the "Lessons from Childhood," the cabaret also taught some "Lessons in Etiquette," highlighted by the very funny and ironic

"Whatever Happened to Class," performed by Ellen Beattie and Susan Speidel. "Lessons in Life" included "High Hopes," "Accentuate the Positive" and a performance of "Ordinary Miracles" by Marci Elyn Schein, who outpowers Streisand at her best.

Act II opened with "Point/Counter Point" and featured such contrasting ideas as "How to Handle a Woman" by the men and "What You Don't Know About Women" by the women. In keeping with the spirit of the season, another lesson was called "Lessons for Santa" and featured a rocking Santa, Baby" and a non-sense "I Am Woman." (I'm not sure how "I Am Woman" reflects a "Lesson for Santa," but I am very aware that the power generated by the four women who delivered the number was enough

to make the question irrelevant.) "Lessons in Seduction" came next, with a gentle "The Summer Knows" and "September Song" and a lively "Baby, It's Cold Outside." The show concluded with "A Brief History of Time," featuring the familiar "As Time Goes By" and the plaintive "Time Heals Everything But Loving You."

If the show were shortened, it would make an ideal entertainment for a first-class cruise ship or a classy casino. And a whole lot might not be lost if the cast were reduced to just four singers.

If the show returns for an encore at the Bickford, it would be fun to see it performed not in the theater, where the acoustics are less than ideal, but perhaps in the open area by the museum's gift shop, which could be set up as an actual cabaret. Somewhere, somehow, "Singing Lessons" deserves to be seen again.