



Arts: March 21, 2008

Austin Cabaret Theatre: Toasting Tony

By Robert Faires

Most folks remember Austin Cabaret Theatre's 2006 gala for the electrifying presence of Eartha Kitt, but the event was auspicious for another reason. In the opening slot, singer Russ Lorensen was premiering a new act that paid tribute to one of pop music's most beloved singers: Astoria, Queens, native Anthony Benedetto – aka Tony Bennett. The audience adored it – "It went over like gangbusters," he says. "My band and I were overwhelmed" – and ever since, Lorensen has been taking *Benedetto/Blessed: A Tribute to the Life and Music of Tony Bennett* all over the country. This week, he brings it back to the place where it all began, this time as Austin Cabaret Theatre's headliner. On a break from rehearsing a production of *Sister Amnesia's Country Western Nonsense Jamboree* with Lee Meriwether – like Kitt, curiously, a former Catwoman from the Sixties TV series *Batman* – Lorensen spoke about *Benedetto/Blessed* and its much-admired subject.

Austin Chronicle: In your mind, what makes Tony Bennett exceptional as a singer?

Russ Lorensen: What speaks to me is not so much his tone quality – which is superb and not just for a man who's 81; he sounds great by *any* standard – it's his attention to a lyric, his connection with what he's singing about, that comes across in his delivery. Frank Sinatra has been quoted many times as saying that "Tony Bennett is the best singer in the business," but most people forget the rest of what Sinatra said: "He's the singer who gets across what the composer has in mind and probably a little more." That's the genius of Tony Bennett!

Another thing that makes him stand out for me is that he keeps singing many of the same songs, even after 50 years, but he allows them to change and grow with him. The 1950 recording of "Because of You" is a very different interpretation than that on his 1962 Carnegie Hall concert recording. And it's completely different from his later recordings of the song, including the one he did with k.d. lang on his 2006 *Duets* album. But they're all equally wonderful. And it's not that he "takes it easy" on the later recordings – his later adaptations are often more challenging vocally than the early ones!

AC: You've said that you're not trying to imitate Tony Bennett. What are you doing?

RL: The show is my love letter to Mr. Bennett, plain and simple, very much like his own tribute albums to musicians he's admired. I feel as though I know him intimately and that when I do the show, I am sitting down to tell the story of my dear friend's life. He's an incredible humanitarian, a civil rights activist who always stands up for what's right, regardless of the cost. I tell a story in the show about an experience he had in World War II, where he got demoted just for being friends with a black man. It may sound strange, but I feel so proud when I talk about him, and I truly am honored that I get to sing his material. Audiences love Tony Bennett the man, and I get to bask in a little of that when I do the show. I know that most people do not come to the show because they're fans of mine – they're fans of *his*. So I take it very seriously, knowing that I am an unofficial ambassador for him and his career.

AC: *Any anecdotes from that first performance of the show in Austin?*

RL: Something happened at that first show, and it's repeated itself every single time we've done the show. After the performance, an elderly couple approached me, and they had tears in their eyes. The lady took my hand and told me that "Because of You" was their "first dance" song at their wedding in 1952 – and that they had just celebrated their 54th wedding anniversary. She said that when they heard me sing the song, they were transported back to that very special day and wanted to thank me. Similar things have happened everywhere we've done the show – people have very strong personal connections to Mr. Bennett and his music, and they love to tell their stories. That's what I meant about basking in his glow. It's truly an honor.

AC: *Any wisdom you've gleaned from Mr. Bennett that you're applying to your own career?*

RL: Never compromise – only perform the very best music. And who can go wrong by following Mr. Bennett's lead?

Russ Lorenson performs Benedetto/Blessed: A Tribute to the Life and Music of Tony Bennett March 27-28, Thursday-Friday, 8:30pm, at the Mansion at Judges' Hill, 1900 Rio Grande. For more information, call 453-2287 or visit www.austincabaret.org.

Copyright © 2008 Austin Chronicle Corporation. All rights reserved.