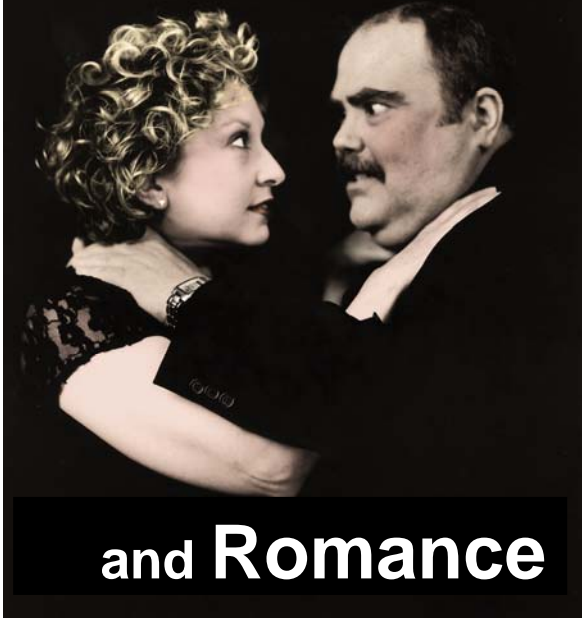


of Wit



and Romance

Photo by Josh Yu

The Intelligencer.

Thursday, June 8, 2006

"Some of the issues sound like it's this serious therapeutic kind of show," says Debra Vogel, here with Brian Tom O'Connor, "but it's so much fun with all these universal experiences people find themselves in. It's kind of like life: One minute, you're laughing; the next, you feel like your heart is in your stomach and you just got kicked but then the next minute, you're back up again."

**It's a musical blend that, delivered by the dynamic duo of O'Connor & Vogel, is sure to have you in stitches.**

**F**or those who plan to catch the duo of O'Connor & Vogel at Odette's this weekend, keep in mind this caveat:

There are moments that actually may make you cringe. Times when you will

squirm with embarrassment, perhaps even discomfort. You might find yourself moved to tears, and if you happen to bring a date, eyeing your partner with renewed interest that speaks either to greater fondness or a sudden desire to flee.

But take heed of this advice, too:

You will laugh — uproariously. And as this pair of musical comedy character actors dispenses their madcap blend of wit and talent, any distress you feel is likely to be fleeting, dissolved almost as instantly as it appears in a fit of side-splitting laughter.

Part of what makes the performances by Brian Tom O'Connor and Debra Vogel so appealing, you see, is their ability to bring our foibles and follies in romantic relationships to light in a way that invites humorous self-examination.

"A lot of times, cabarets can be very

#### IF YOU GO

**Who:** O'Connor & Vogel in "Guy and Doll" and "How To Be Perfect"

**Where:** Odette's, 274 S. River Road, New Hope

**When:** "Guy and Doll" at 8 p.m. Friday;

"How To Be Perfect" at 8 p.m.

Saturday

**Information:** [www.oconnor-and-vogel.com](http://www.oconnor-and-vogel.com)

autobiographical where the performer talks about his or her own life or describes different things they've gone through," says Vogel. "I don't know if we said this or if someone else said this to us, but in cabaret, you learn about the performer. What makes our show different is that (audiences) also learn about themselves but in a funny, lighthearted way."

As the acclaimed New York performers bring their two smash revues, "Guy and Doll" and "How to be Perfect," to New Hope this weekend, some may be scratching their heads at their having found a place in cabaret. An O'Connor & Vogel show is crafted as a series of scenes between two characters, each delving into a particular aspect of romantic love, of course with just the right song — duets selected from the

treasure trove of famous and not-so-famous musicals — to punctuate the emotions being explored.

"We love, love, love the music, but we approach each scene as actors. For instance, the first song in 'Guy and Doll,' takes place in Edwardian London and it's some lecherous old man and young 17-year-old girl that he introduces to red wine and... other things," says Vogel, of the droll Michael Flanders and Donald Swann gem, "Have Some Madeira, M'Dear."

From there, it's a charming and raucous unraveling of the relationship journey, from those awkward first moments of dating to the sweetness of seduction and then the ensuing disbelief that awaits the smitten when they're forced to remove their rose-colored glasses. Yet while O'Connor & Vogel linger over love's travails in a series of sketches about marriage, with tunes such as "Take a Job" from "Do Re Mi" and "The Man I Used to Be" from "Pipe Dream," they remain optimistic. The closing numbers ride a high note from disillusionment to reconciliation with among the more clever numbers, a bit involving Barbie and Ken dolls set to "The Pajama Game's" "I'll Never Be Jealous Again."

SOUND  
STAGE

Naila  
Francis



"It's all the issues in relationships that people recognize but we approach most of them in a very funny way so that while people are recognizing these problems or these things that they confront, they're laughing at us and laughing at themselves also," says Vogel.

"And at the same time, they're getting an earful of some really great songs," adds O'Connor. "The first step is finding the songs, classic O'Connor & Vogel songs that have a great melody, wonderful lyrics and a relationship already implied."

"How to Be Perfect," which lampoons the self-help tenets of successful relationships, opens, for instance, with "Economics," by Kurt Weill and Alan Jay Lerner, in a scene with a couple clashing over finances.

"Brian is the romantic and I'm more the pragmatist," says Vogel. "I think we need to be financially solvent in order to be perfect."

"I think we can just live on love and don't need any money," says O'Connor. "That whole idea of how one side of a relationship wants to change the other, wants the other to be perfect and better – that theme runs through both shows."

And so there are characters like the woman who finds that her new and improved love is actually less preferable than the man she wanted to change; the couple whose communication skills, honed through months of therapy, desert them when they need it the most; and the husband whose bright idea of making a list of each other's flaws with the aim of self-improvement rapidly blows up in his face.

It's farcical comedy that has called to mind the likes of Jackie Gleason and Nancy Walker and the boisterous hilarity of their 1960's television specials. And indeed the duo's director, Elfin Frederick, has steered them toward the deadpan dialogue and flawless improvisations of one of America's pioneering comedic duos, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, whose high-energy satirical sketches were among the most popular on radio, stage and television during the 1950s and early '60s.

"That was one of the nicest things anyone has ever said about us, comparing us to the screwball



Photo by Akiko Shioi

**"It's like the classic romantic comedies,"** says Brian Tom O'Connor of the revues he performs with Debra Vogel. "The audience, they get to like these two people but they know these two people are having some real conflicts and they're not getting together. You see them fight, but when they come together at the end, it's very satisfying.

comedies," says Vogel. "Some people might be insulted, but not us."

With such heavy satire and tongue-in-cheek humor, it can be a challenge to keep in character while also allowing audiences to glimpse the true personalities of the performers and their connection to the songs, one of the hallmarks of cabaret.

"When we first started, there was a pretty strong fourth wall that we put up, and gradually we found that we poked holes in the fourth wall and really talked to the audience," says O'Connor. "And then we added the character sketches and put the wall back, but at that point, we'd already introduced ourselves to the audience and let them get to know us. It actually took a while of trial and error to achieve that balance."

The two, who both have backgrounds in theater, have been working together for more than four years, hatching the idea for their mix of comedy and music when a friend asked them to come up with a scene to perform at a party. They had so much fun creating their character sketch, they performed again at the same party the

following year and pretty soon had developed their signature brand of miniature musical comedies.

"We have different ways of working but respect each other's way," says Vogel, of why they work so well together. "Brian is more organized in his brain and more cerebral. He works everything out, which is wonderful to watch, because he works it all out and then it's still completely spontaneous. I think I tend to be a little more by the seat of my pants in the rehearsal process."

"All I know," says O'Connor, "is that I find Debra so darned entertaining."

It's a combination that ultimately proves exhilarating.

"We like our audience, we want them to feel good," says O'Connor. "This is not about us teaching them to be better people. It's about us getting them to have a good time, and discovering that even with conflict, which is part of every relationship, it's still better than loneliness. It's still better to have fought and made up than to have not been engaged with another human being at all."