

Patrick's Cabaret

ON STAGE by Patrick Scully

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Democracy lives

Offbeat venue's founder battled arts elitism — and won

By Patrick Scully

Special to the Star Tribune

I asked a great teacher how I might become less critical of myself when performing. He said that he didn't know but that I might start with judging others less.

My life as a performing artist has been surrounded by judgment: Audition to get into a show, or a showcase, or a company. Apply and/or audition to get a grant or fellowship. Try to get a presenter to notice my work. Hope for some media coverage, an intelligent review. It is exhausting, the emotional equivalent of looking for a new job six times a year.

Artistic success meant getting the approval of others. If I was not careful, I got seduced: I'd hear about some panel or presenter or funder. Then I would try to imagine what they were looking for. Then I'd start thinking that that was what I want to do. Rare exceptions to this hostile system stand out; for a few years, we drew names out of a hat to see who would get money from a pool for dancers that was made available at the Minnesota Independent Choreographers' Alliance. Everyone cheered for the winners.

Nigel Redden, then the head of the NEA's Dance Program, dryly admitted that if the NEA did that, it would "adversely affect art administrators."

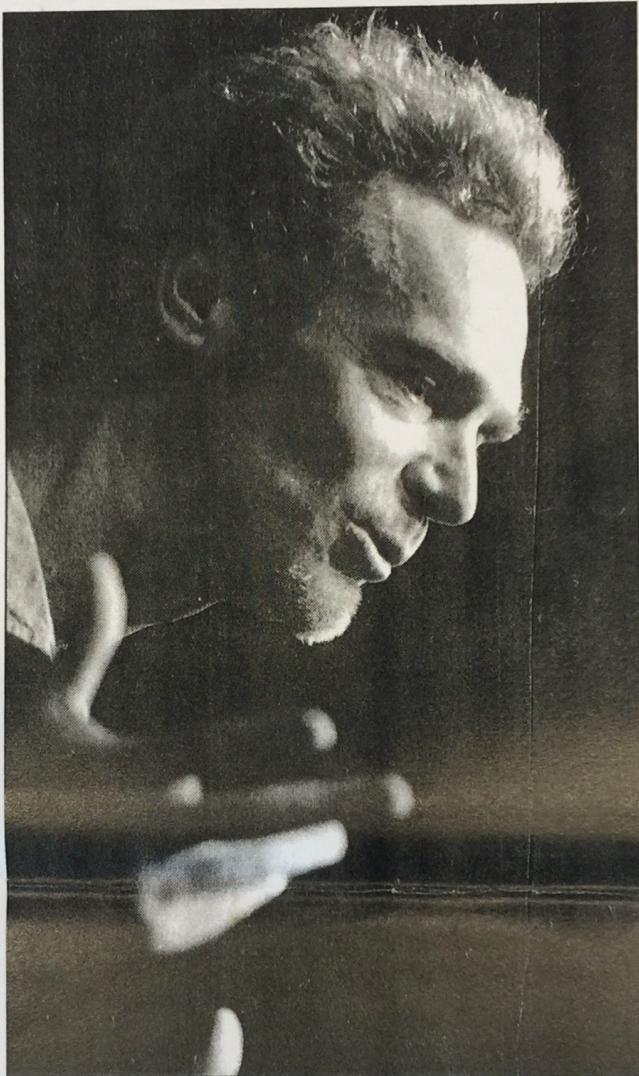
When I started Patrick's Cabaret, I was ready to do things differently. I wanted no panels and required no auditions, no work samples. Artists kept the responsibility for their work. They decided if their work was ready to be shown. My work as a curator was to find artists to invite to perform and to be equally open to people approaching me. I wanted a mix of all kinds of artists doing all kinds of things.

Five years after starting the cabaret, I came across "Turn of the Century Cabaret," a book that helped me realize that what I was doing was part of an artistic tradition: "Cabaret . . . before World War I . . . arose as . . . artists felt a need to come together . . . to experiment in any way the spirit moved them, and most important, to feel free to mock and deride the values and cultural monuments they condemned."

I was glad to be part of a radical tradition of bringing artists together. I was glad to reject the processes of judgment. I tried to replace judgment with perception. The result is an ongoing experiment in cultural democracy, carried out over the past 15 years by hundreds of artists, thousands of audience members, scores of volunteers, dozens of staff and a few handfuls of board members.

If I leave a legacy, I choose to remember it in stories about people who've performed.

Tony Velez was a regular in the cabaret's audience. He was a man from the Bronx whom I met through the radical faeries after he moved here about 1990. He had a cleaning business, so I hired him to clean the cabaret. One day, mopping the floor, he said, "Patrick, I have



Patrick's Cabaret

- **Who:** Founder and artistic director Patrick Scully takes his final turn as emcee before leaving the cabaret for other pursuits.
- **Where:** 3010 Minnehaha Av. S., Mpls.
- **When:** 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat.
- **Tickets:** \$6. 612-721-3595.

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photo by Stormi
Greener

some poems I have been writing, do you suppose I could read some of them in a show sometime?"

I was thrilled. Few things give me greater pleasure than to help someone think of himself as an artist. I knew Tony well, but I now know him better, having heard him read his intimate "Cafe con Mami." Simple personal vignettes of Tony and his mother tying on head rags, cleaning the house and having coffee for a reward. Tony became a regular on stage.

I first saw Elaine Shelly perform in the Out There series at the Southern Theater. She danced a performance poem, in her wheelchair, in which she referred to herself as a "crippled black woman." I was excited and invited her to perform at the cabaret. When she presented the piece at the cabaret a few months later, she refined her self-description to "crippled black dyke." I was surprised. I didn't know she was a lesbian. I was deeply gratified that I could provide an artist with her genius a space where she felt

safe to claim yet more of her identity.

Twenty years ago, I did a dance residency in the Long Prairie schools. The town's opera hall was boarded up. Only the lobby was in use, as a video rental store. This spoke volumes about how cultural life has shifted in the United States. We no longer feel responsible for creating our culture; we go to the store to get it, or turn on the television.

I tell audiences that the cabaret is about "not television," but it is about more than that. It is about cultural democracy, the belief that each of us has something to say and the creative potential to bring it to expression. This is very different from, and in many ways antithetical to, notions of "excellence" in the arts.

If I get to choose how I will be remembered, I'd rather be remembered for being democratic than excellent.

— Patrick Scully is a Minneapolis dancer and performer.