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IRISH VOICE ENTERTAINMENT

Live and Amazing at the IAC

March 5, 2008

From The Hob

THE Donaghy Theater space at Manhattan's Irish Arts Center (IAC) is one of those small spaces that comes up larger than life for certain shows because of the intimacy it affords. Some performances radiate beyond the 99 seat capacity and make those in attendance keenly aware that they are sharing that space and time where quality outshines quantity anytime.

Recently, the spotlight fell on two singer-songwriters who were brought in together in an artistic collaborative venture that heralded the beginning of one of the more ambitious and welcome initiatives to come out of the 38-year-old grassroots organization.

Though one artist was twice the age of the other, there was no fear of a generation gap, but rather close parallels that served as the foundation for this unique opportunity that provided both fascinating musical entertainment and insight into the craft of performing personal songs.

The twinning of Paul Brady from Co. Tyrone with Sarah Siskind of North Carolina for the inaugural "Masters in Collaboration: Ireland's Musical Greats in Partnership with a New Generation of Artists, Paul Brady Meets Sarah Siskind" was an inspired beginning for what one hopes will be many such shows.

The concept grew out of discussions between Dr. Mick Moloney, the pre-eminent Irish music expert in the U.S. based at New York University, and Aidan Connolly, the executive director of the Irish Arts Center since last March.

One institution is hardly enough to handle the proliferating programming ideas of Moloney, so he found a willing ally in Connolly, who relishes the opportunity for the IAC to pursue and embrace more interdisciplinary platforms especially for music for its adaptable venue and present day cultural agenda.

Moloney immediately thought of his old flat-mate and band member from the Johnstons, Paul Brady, as the first master to be invited and he coaxed him into participating. Brady, in turn, sought out the younger Siskind based in Nashville, where they first met at a Maura O'Connell concert.

Both agreed to come to the Big Apple for a week and explore one another's music to see what they could say to one another and to a live audience at the end of their personal workshop. Both share a serious dedication to the craft of songwriting and expressing their feelings through their voices, which is paramount to their music because of their vivid storytelling images.

A very important part of the project was a relatively last minute inclusion of a live interview in the Donaghy Theater which gave a midweek glance at how the creative juices were flowing and melding, and in the deft questioning by compere Moloney himself which provided greater context and rationale.

Those in attendance learned much about the artists and their approach to music and performance. It turned out to be a very important component because it helped break the tedium of the intense rehearsals going on right up to last day that both exacting artists felt were necessary to do their best at the Saturday gig.

There was still an air of mystery and intrigue (read uncertainty) to the whole affair from all sides with a vested interest in the Saturday concert that really translated into added excitement for the show itself.

The Donaghy Theater was well lit, a soundman familiar with both artists imported from Nashville, a Steinway grand piano on stage along with an electronic keyboard and multiple guitars set the scene for the artists to do what they do best, entertain.

An evenhanded approach worked all evening, with 10 songs from each composer alternating lead vocals and harmonies when called upon as well as a fluid choreography from instrument to instrument in the tight stage quarters.

In their favor were a very receptive and eclectic audience who thoroughly enjoyed the collaborative efforts and highly personal approach that each artist was taking



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and their deference to one another which revealed no favoritism.

The only edge was in the music they selected, which served as an attraction to one another in the first place and made this project so appealing.

When an audience is so close like this, live shows — especially of the type you have never done before like this — can be risky, but the warmth and genuine response of the crowd gave it more of a cabaret ambience where the artists quickly established a personal connection offering reassurance that something special was happening.

In post concert conversations with both Brady and Siskind, it was surprising that the veteran performer admitted to being more nervous up to and during the performance. Though Brady has worked in a number of bands like the Johnstons and Planxty and for a brief time in a duo with Andy Irvine and fronting his own touring band at times, he has pretty much been “a lone wolf” who likes to create his own scene or move more comfortably through his own material.

Siskind found herself “at ease” for the gig, and felt that all the work and preparation would pay off and that she was gratified to be working with an artist who treated her with mutual respect and attention.

Brady’s demeanor on stage came across more relaxed than other times that I have seen him throughout his career, and his smiling overtures and genuine compliments to his new-found partner of the week suggested a comfort level that was borne out by the overall success of the venture and performance.

Still it was 24 hours after the concert when long-time pal and instigator Moloney finally convinced Paul that it was an outstanding success.

“That I was quite unprepared for his enthusiasm as he is a taciturn guy generally and I wasn’t used to him showing his emotions so freely but he finally convinced me that something special happened,” Brady told me by phone.

“You work so hard all week and see that some things that were difficult in practice came out okay, and the audience was responding all night. The rushes came to Sarah and me at the same time and the things that excited us in rehearsal excited us on stage. You knew it had to be successful.”

The final indicator of that to this long-time observer of Brady’s music was the first song of their encore when it was time for Brady “to do this one song on his own” Siskind revealed.

The first chords on the guitar brought instant reaction from the audience, who recognized the phenomenal finger work that influenced a generation of pickers in Irish music. It was the intro to his signature song “Arthur McBride and the Sergeant.”

Firmly on familiar turf, he unfurled the big story of British Army recruiting efforts in as dramatic and comical a fashion as I have ever seen him perform. As he expressed it he was “giddy with a certain amount of emotional release” by that time of the night.

Earlier in the week, he told us that he learned the song here in America shortly after the Johnstons broke up in America and he ventured out on his own in the early 1970s.

Ironically his first testing ground for the song and his solo act was at one of weekly seisiuns then hosted by an itinerant Irish Arts Center at a place called Monk’s Park on Park Avenue South in the 20s right before moving to its present home in Hell’s Kitchen.

The rather boisterous upstairs room drew still and quiet whenever Brady would begin to sing and play the guitar and it was clear then a brighter future awaited him. Few then could imagine the success that awaited him or that of the Irish Arts Center in those days, but from one very magic week in New York in February those early seeds are very much bearing fruit today.

And it will continue to expand and grow with great potential for tomorrow that will include artists like Sarah Siskind and so many others.

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