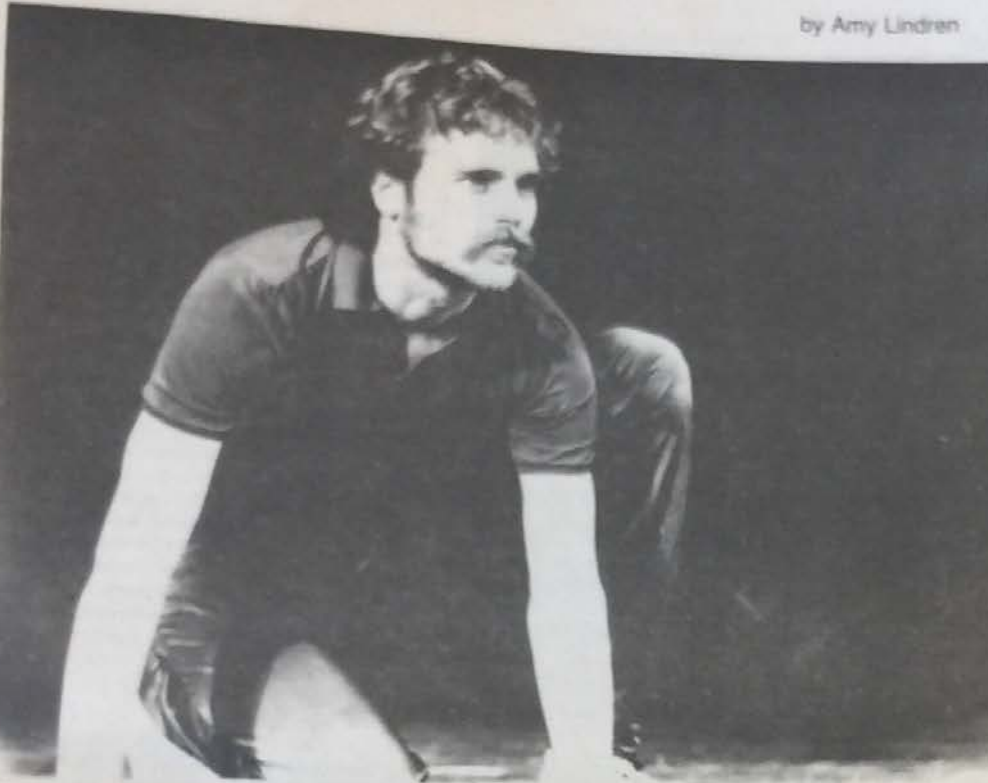


A Cabaret

by Amy Lindren



Patrick Scully
Performing at Mankato State University

Let's get this straight. I'm not what you'd call a regular kind of gal. I don't get to work on time, I don't leave on time, and nothing in between ever runs on schedule. My meals come at odd hours and the cats look grateful to be fed at all.

So how, I ask myself, have I managed to attend two of Patrick Scully's Cabarets and make a firm commitment to a third? Actually, given the staggering number of regular arts performances in the area, a more pertinent question is "why." Why would I make such an effort to attend the Scully Cabarets, shunning other artistic fare?

It started like this. My friend Mary and I were sitting around my office one day, drinking instant coffee from plastic mugs and trading equally pedestrian stories about our tepid social calendars, when something Mary said made my ears perk up.

"I didn't see anyone Saturday. I went to a show, a cabaret."

"Oh, a cabaret," I repeated stupidly. "That's different, isn't it?"

Anyway, on one of my trips by on her level of consciousness, I heard Mary describe an improvisational dancer who abruptly ended his show by leaping head first out the open window.

Now this was interesting. I drained my cold coffee and swung my

feet off the file cabinet, one hand pawing the desk next to me for my Official Reporter notebook, the one with the ballpoint pen in the spiral, ever ready for that late-breaking story.

Yanking the pen free and flipping open the notebook, I asked Mary to give me all the details.

Several seconds later, my pen poised over the empty page, I realized she was still looking at me.

"The details?" she said.

"About the dancer taking his life in front of the unsuspecting crowd. Leaping to his death in a fit of artistic passion. Making the ultimate statement."

I leaned forward, eager to catch every word. I could see the Pulitzer gleaming faintly in the air behind Mary's head. Imagine interviewing a witness to the most sensational suicide of the year!

"Taking his life!" Mary said. "He didn't die - it was a first floor window, for godssake! He came back in the door and introduced the next act."

She looked at me with undiluted irritation and stood up. Something about the way she dumped her coffee in the sink, with brown drops splashing back over the counter, told me she wasn't going to continue the story. A reporter makes her living by being sensitive to these things.

Well, that was October. I know it's January now, but a good story takes time to develop. When I understood the Pulitzer was out of my reach on this one (alright for this time, but remember: a good reporter is never more than a story away from the Big One), I lowered my sights only slightly to the next best alternative: the FAN.

It was an ace reporter for the almighty FAN that I made my way with friends to St. Stephen's school one blustery Saturday night in November. St. Stephen's, a Catholic grade school, presides over its Franklin-15W neighborhood with dignity and a sense of conscience. A number of political and public events take place regularly in its drafty auditorium and its halls resonate with the sounds of laughter and debate as people break from the action inside.

On this cold evening, people were hurrying to get in and pay their \$3 admission so they could sit down in the less-cold auditorium. A word of caution: when you go, bring a sweater. Like most folks with an auditorium, St. Stephen's can't afford to keep it shopping-mail toasty.

What the school lacks in heat, however, Cabaret organizer Patrick Scully more than makes up for in setting the atmosphere. Every table in the darkened room sported a glimmering candle and a fresh-cut flower in a bud vase. Scully also stations several theater lights around the stage and does a respectable job of operating them for each performance.

At a little after eight, right on time, Scully stepped forward to welcome us and introduce the first act. Still a little jaundiced with that reporter's cynicism, I wasn't well-prepared for what followed.

I had an absolutely marvelous time.

From the opening comedian, who really does need more practice, to the trio of musicians, to the poets and writers, every act seemed fresh and entertaining. A couple of performers definitely need polishing, and one in particular might consider another career, but their presence still added more than it took away. By risking a bad performance these artists lent texture and variety to the evening. And, because they weren't perfect, some of the responsibility for entertaining me was shifted to my shoulders. I became a supporter as well as a viewer, a member of a participatory audience.

That's not to say the acts were amateur, however. To the contrary, a number were as close to perfect as you'd pay \$8 for elsewhere. I was particularly taken with the literary offerings. Chris Cinque, a local playwright and author of national renown, captivated the audience with

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a sparkling reading from a work-in-progress. She won my heart completely with her prose and humor. Likewise, I was pleasantly surprised to hear Barrie Boritch read from her growing selection of poetry. Boritch is a local poet with a distinctly wry voice. I have actually pulled over in my car to hear her on the radio. And Sue Halloran, a regular at the Cabaret, was no slouch reading an original short story.

I think the real gem of the evening, however, the act that broke me down completely and made me a fan of the Cabaret, was David Lyndahl's "Dead Ends," a series of five performance poems.

Actually, I have a real problem with performance poems. For the most part, I'm a little too cynical to look past the contorted figure in tights and really hear the angst as they describe their Volkswagen, or some subject of equal interest to me. If you've been following the marital problems of Mike and J.J. in "Doonesbury" recently, then you'll understand when I say I feel about performance poetry as Mike does about his new-wave haircut. A little silly.

Apparently David Lyndahl understands. He began his piece by darkening the room completely. After innumerable adjustments (were they part of the act?) a tape-recorder played a charming repartee between a father and his child at bedtime. Oh, I thought tolerantly. Like home movies. After more silence, Lyndahl appeared with a flashlight, and padded around the stage in his stocking feet, making more adjustments to props we couldn't see. Another long, interminable silence. Ever polite, the audience shifted only slightly, and waited. And waited. Lyndahl was managing to create the ultimate in group apprehension. We were all worried about him. Was he going to fall on his face? Was he ready? We started to cough and fidget, hoping to prompt some kind of response.

Finally, to our relief, Lyndahl appeared, walking slowly to a large bowl on a waist-high stand. Positioning himself firmly behind it, he placed his hands in the bowl and, with an eerie green light playing on his face, announced solemnly, "Ode to water."

Ode to water? Was he kidding? I looked around and saw several people looking uncomfortably forward. When I felt my friend begin to shake uncontrollably, I realized we all wanted to laugh but no one wanted to hurt his feelings. Finally one woman in the back let out a huge guffaw and the rest of us followed with nervous laughter. As Lyndahl continued unperturbed, I

began to see how firmly his tongue was planted in his cheek. He had created that tension on purpose! Here was a case of the artist turning the tables on the audience, making us the entertainment as we all struggled to maintain decorum. I'm going to keep my eye on that Lyndahl - he's tricky.

Later, as my friends and I stepped back into the chill November air, I remembered with a start that my job wasn't over. My god! I had forgotten to talk to Scully, the man who kept these things going! Even ace reporters have their lapses. . .

Patrick Scully is a friendly man, and completely accommodating over the phone. An improvisational contact dancer (he's the one who leaped out the window in an earlier cabaret), Scully says he's been moving toward calling himself a performer rather than a dancer.

"There are too many expectations about what dance should be. I'm just not interested in dealing with that anymore."

Moving away from expectations is what Scully's work, and the Cabaret, are all about. Scully began the Cabaret last spring after his performance was rejected by another forum in town as being "too experimental." The rejection gave Scully the catalyst he needed to begin the Cabaret at St. Stephen's.

"I just thought, 'I'm not the only person who's not mainstream enough to perform elsewhere.' The Cabaret was partly in my mind already, but then I really got going"

Scully went through his Rolodex, calling every person he knew who performs. Every person. As Scully says, he wasn't interested in judging their work, or their genre, but in giving them space to perform.

"It's a real challenge as a performer to get past judgment and just create. I wanted to create a forum as judgement-free as possible."

For that reason, Scully does not require auditions before performers appear at the Cabaret. In fact there are no restrictions at all. Acts are taken on a first-come, first-serve basis, with six to eight acts per evening. Scully even solicits his audience, saying, "If any of you would like to perform for us, or know of someone who would, just get in touch with me." Scully's only requirement is that potential acts attend a cabaret beforehand so they know what they're getting into.

After eight shows, and with six more scheduled, Scully has had no trouble finding people to perform. Nor has he had any negative feedback yet. Scully says he's had people tell him it's the best place to perform in the Twin Cities. "That makes me feel good," he said.

As the main catalyst and organizer, Scully should take the praise personally. His operation of the Cabaret is a classic example of grass roots art in action. In order to secure the space at St. Stephen's, Scully bartered dance lessons to the grade schoolers. His only cash payment from either activity comes from what remains of the \$3 admission fees after postage and other bills are paid. In essence, Scully works at two jobs for one small paycheck, a situation he's somewhat committed to.

"I'd like to get more money, of course, and I'd like to pay the performers," he says. "But I don't want to raise admission. I like that people can afford to come here and still have a bite to eat after."

Of course, Scully wouldn't be in it if his rewards were only monetary or even altruistic. In addition to giving others a place to perform, Scully has also given himself a regular forum to try new things. One of the advantages to the Cabaret, he says, is being one of a number of performers.

"There's sort of a freedom in being one of a lot of people performing. The success of the evening doesn't rest on my shoulders. When people feel freed of that responsibility, they do better."

Scully says the audience also contributes to a good performance. "Most of the people in the Cabaret know there are people in the



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audience they know. That makes a big difference. If you go back in history most people have performed for people they know. It's only in this mass-media, jet age that people are performing for people they don't know."

Scully may have something there. If you want to join a friendly audience, or scout out the Cabaret for a future performance, just show up at St. Stephen's, 22nd and Clinton in Minneapolis, at 8:00 on one of the following Saturdays: Jan. 24, Feb. 21, Mar. 21, Ap. 25, May 16, or June 20. Admission is \$3. Who knows, maybe I'll see you there sometime. I'll be the one with the Official Reporter notebook, with the ballpoint pen in the spiral. I just know I'm getting closer to the Big Story. . .

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