

Dry Cold Productions

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MUSIC

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Broadway icon Cariou comes home to reprise his triumphs

By: Holly Harris

Tony-award-winning singer, actor and former Winnipegger Len Cariou received a hero's welcome Friday night with a program celebrating the music of Broadway legend Stephen Sondheim.

The three weekend shows, *Send in the Clowns: The Music of Stephen Sondheim*, is the latest instalment in the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra's Pops seven-show series. The evening, led by WSO resident conductor Richard Lee, also featured a five-piece vocal ensemble including: Lara Ciekiewicz, Donna Fletcher, Naomi Forman, Peter Huck and Aaron Hutton from Winnipeg's Dry Cold Productions (Reid Harrison and Fletcher, co-artistic directors), backed by 32 singers from the University of Manitoba Faculty of Music's musical theatre program. Two emerging younger talents also made an appearance: Miranda Baran and Melodie Langevin.

Cariou, as Broadway royalty himself, scarcely needs any introduction. Raised in St. Boniface, the critically acclaimed artist cut his musical teeth as a boy soprano in the city before eventually establishing an acting and singing career in New York City during the 1970s. His lengthy list of productions includes the premiere of Sondheim's iconic musical, *A Little Night Music*, as well as originating the title role of a notorious bloody barber in *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. The WSO, in partnership with Dry Cold, scored a significant artistic coup by presenting Cariou's first hometown singing gig in nearly four decades since appearing with Rainbow Stage's *My Fair Lady* in 1975.

The show kicked off with the boisterous *Comedy Tonight (A Funny thing Happened on the Way to the Forum)* that gave the first taste of Cariou's renowned showmanship. Although his voice has lost some of its former power, his stage instincts still proved razor sharp as the ensemble gamely fought with microphone problems with their voices -- particularly Cariou's -- cutting out at inopportune times. These technical difficulties were (mostly) resolved by the next number, *Waiting for the Girls Upstairs (Follies)*.

The first showstopper invariably belonged not to the evening's star, but to Fletcher. In what could only be described as a career highlight, the Winnipeg soprano performed *Send in the Clowns (A Little Night Music)* with heartfelt sincerity and bittersweet resolve. She accomplished the near-impossible by making this classic her own, singing in duet with Cariou as the original Frederik.

Not to be outdone, Ciekiewicz also filled her solo, *Losing My Mind (Follies)* with dramatic intensity, shading every phrase while making it ring with emotional resonance.

Cariou set up the musical numbers by providing plot synopses and characterization for each of the show's selections. However, if anyone in the crowd of 1,475 expected to be regaled with juicy gossip and backstage trivia about his many years on the Great White Way, or even a little waxing nostalgia for his birth city, they would have been disappointed.

The program also included a set from *Sweeney Todd*, including *Ballad of Sweeney Todd, There was a Barber and his Wife*, poignant ballads *Johanna* and *Not While I'm Around*, before closing with *A Little Priest*.

It seems au courant these days to hear the old guard -- think octogenarian Tony Bennett -- still performing and recording these days. Despite the fact that his own solos in the show were relatively scant, the 72-years- young Cariou proved he still has a song in his heart, showing 'em how it's done as a native son the city can be proud of.

(four and a half stars out of five)

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