

Interview

February 2006

CABARET—ALIVE AND KICKING •



THE CITIZENS BAND BY VERONICA WEBB

TAKE A FOOTBALL TEAM OF CREATIVE MULTITASKERS, A HANDFUL OF SINGERS, A COUPLE OF ACROBATS, AND ONE PREGNANT SUPERMODEL, THROW IN A DOLLOP OF PERFORMANCE ART, A DOSE OF POLITICS, AND SOME SERIOUS TIGHTROPE WALKING, AND YOU'VE GOT A TROUPE FOR THE TIMES

At this very moment the laurels of New York City's avant-garde nightlife rest firmly on the head of the Citizens Band. The 20-plus-member theater troupe carries an emotional and visual jolt. Presented in the style of Weimar Republic cabaret, their performances beg the chilling question: Have we found ourselves again in a political climate where intolerance triumphs over reason?

Their latest offering, "The Trepanning Opera," is a confectionary mix of silent film, aerial acrobatics, classical music, and delta blues.

Scrubbed of irony, the tone of the standards and the original compositions they perform is emotionally raw, which makes their doomsday themes of heartbreak, infirmity, and death darkly delicious.

Interview recently caught up with some of the core members of the Citizens Band, Sarah Sophie Flicker, Karen Elson, Adam Dugas, Chelsea Bacon, and Paul Cantelon.

SARAH SOPHIE FLICKER

VERONICA WEBB: The Citizens Band is like a

carnival of human fears. It kind of brings it all down to a place where you can handle it, instead of not having to think about it at all.

SARAH SOPHIE FLICKER: Yeah. I think the scariest thing is *not* thinking about those fears at all, which is a place that culturally we all get stuck in sometimes. The one thing that I know, and everyone we're working with seems to be interested in,

Above: Members of the Citizens Band performing their show, "The Trepanning Opera," at Deitch Projects in New York City.

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MORE CABARET—ALIVE AND KICKING

is that we repeat the same dramas over and over again, and we may never know the answers. But the interesting thing is exploring them and not being afraid, and really getting in there with loss and death and all the big scary things in the world. I've always felt that the bravest thing you can do is just be vulnerable and express that in whatever you're doing.

KAREN ELSON

VW: You're very interested in the era when cabaret first emerged. What was going on in that time period between 1880 and 1930 that fascinates you so much?

KAREN ELSON: It's definitely a period I love. The 1920s, in particular, were a very liberating time for art and also for women. They were creative and really led individual lives, and struggled with art for good or for worse. That was the essence of cabaret, wasn't it? There was a sense of irony. They were saying, "Well, look at this world. It's grim and maybe we don't agree with everything going on, but we're going to sing a song about it." Cabaret does not point the finger. It just lays the story out for you to make up your own mind. We're trying to convey something, but not necessarily in a judgmental way. Maybe that's why people respond.

CHELSEA BACON

VW: You're a trapeze artist. Do you work in front of a mirror when you're rehearsing?

CHELSEA BACON: Not really, no. That's one of the funny things with the Citizens Band because I can't actually rehearse with everyone else. We rehearse in Sarah's apartment, so we can't hang a trapeze there. The way I create a new work is usually very improvisational. It's important that it sort of emerges out of the piece as a whole. So that it's not just like, "Okay, now we have an aerial act!" So that, somehow, it all holds and supports each other.

VW: It's very interesting to me that you were afraid of heights.

CB: Yeah. For me, it's really just about taking it like six inches at a time.

PAUL CANTELON

VW: Where did the name come from?

PAUL CANTELON: If I recall, we were all sitting around. Jesse [Peretz, Flicker's husband] and

Sarah are two of my very dearest friends, and they would always erupt into these great salon concerts because they have a wonderful Steinway, and I remember Jorjee [Douglass, a performer and creative director with the group] and Sarah bandying around all these names, and at some point, I just remember very tipsily at the end of the night they said, "Citizens Band." It all happened by the time the chocolate mousse was done.

VW: Oh, okay, so it was a confection.

PC: Out of the confection was born the name.

ADAM DUGAS

VW: When I saw your show I got chills because I really thought to myself, What are they saying—that this is really the end of civilization?

ADAM DUGAS: I was thinking of that recently when we did the show and the first song was Noël Coward's "Bad Times Are Just Around the Corner." Even though the lyrics are about this sort of impending doom, the energy we have about life and our hope for the future comes across. The message isn't that everything is bad, it's that we can overcome it all by working together and being creative. That's the really fun part of the Citizens Band, the magic of collaboration, where 26 people can share the same vision and all bring their specific talents to it, and help paint that bigger picture.

Interview contributing editor Veronica Webb last talked to pop star Usher in the November 2005 issue. Hair: MICHELLE SYNDER. Makeup: MATHU ANDERSON. Photos: THOMAS DOZOL.

