

CABARETSCENES



YOUR
NIGHTCLUB GUIDE
JULY/AUGUST 2014
\$4.50 USA

**Mark
Nadler**

**Kurt
Reichenbach**

**Peter
Leavy**

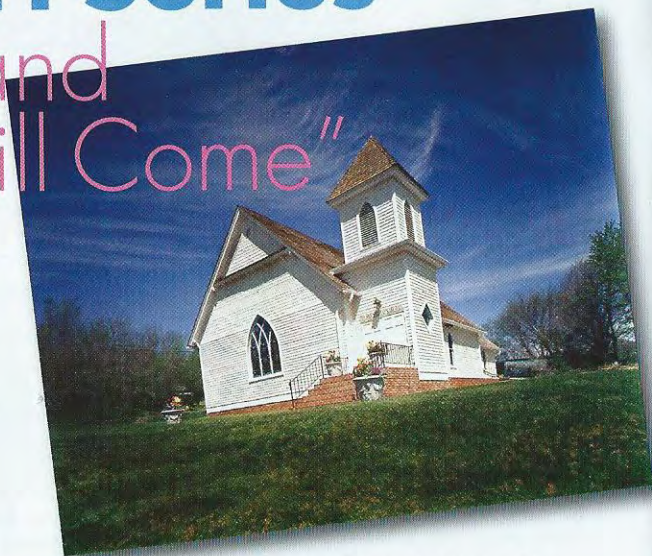
**Ervin
Drake**

**Alyce
Finell**

Brownville Concert Series

"Build It and They Will Come"

By **Todd Murray**



or almost 25 years,

tiny Brownville, Nebraska has been home to a cabaret spot—a former church—featuring many of the biggest names and best performers in cabaret. Last year, when Todd Murray told us he'd be heading there to be part of the Brownville Concert Series cabaret Christmas show, we asked him to give us a full report on the venue, the town, and his entire experience. With the new season on its way, we thought this was a good time for his report. Here it is...

Burbank Airport: Dec. 11, 6:30 AM. Piling onto this small commuter flight with 80 passengers bound for Denver, my eyes are bloodshot, my arms full with a bulky winter coat too heavy for L.A., a scarf, a computer, an iPad, a cell phone, and a bottle of anti-bacterial lotion. The other passengers looked drowsy, as if they have made this trip daily for years, carrying a much more economical array of accessories. I share the

drowsy part, but this trip to Brownville doesn't happen often for me, and it is welcome when it does. After a stop in Denver, we continue east. The snow-covered mountains turn to flat land and dull yellow fields below. Finally, the captain announces that Omaha is near. Upon my arrival, I see my friends and fellow performers—Andrea Marcovicci, Jeff Harnar, Natalie Douglas and Shelly Markham. We're here to introduce a show that Andrea created, *Christmas in Brownville, Nebraska*.

The likelihood of most folks knowing of or even having heard of Brownville (don't even THINK of adding an "s" after Brown) is very remote. But professional cabaret singers most certainly have. Nestled on the Missouri River 75 miles south of Omaha and 120 miles from Kansas City, Brownville isn't "near" anything. But for Midwesterners, a two-hour drive is just down the road a piece.

The *Brownville Concert Series* was the passion and brainchild of Jim Keene. He

comes from frontier stock. A successful business owner in Omaha with a subcutaneous optimistic go-gettingness typical of these parts, Jim had a dream, and by darned, didn't he make it happen?—with a little help from his friends...and their aunts, and cousins, and the farmer down the way.

Jim put together a non-profit committee with one shared vision: to bring high-end performances to southern Nebraska. At his first mention of this, his friends couldn't have helped thinking of *Field of Dreams*... "A professional ballpark in the middle of a cornfield???"...but indeed, they built it and they certainly do come.

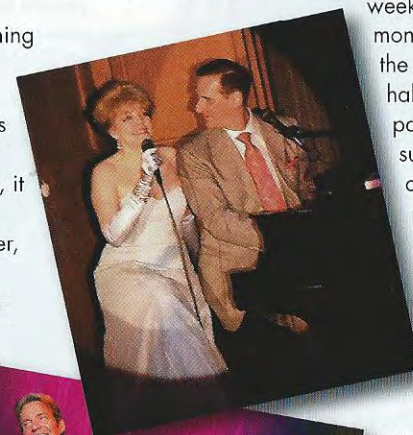
Early on, Brownville was a booming frontier river town established in 1854. A redirection of the Union Pacific Railroad to Omaha sealed its fate: at one time a population of 5,000 bound for state capital status, it all but dwindled to, well, a ghost town...population 150 in the summer, 100 in the winter. I say all but dwindled... thanks to the *Brownville Concert Series* and assorted artisan shops the population more than doubles one weekend a month.

Keene and his board of directors offer a wide variety of highly professional jazz, classical, instrumental and cabaret entertainment that normally only the crowds and deep pockets of urban areas could support. Yes, singers...they pay us. You don't work for the door, you don't have to rent a van for you and your musicians, eat

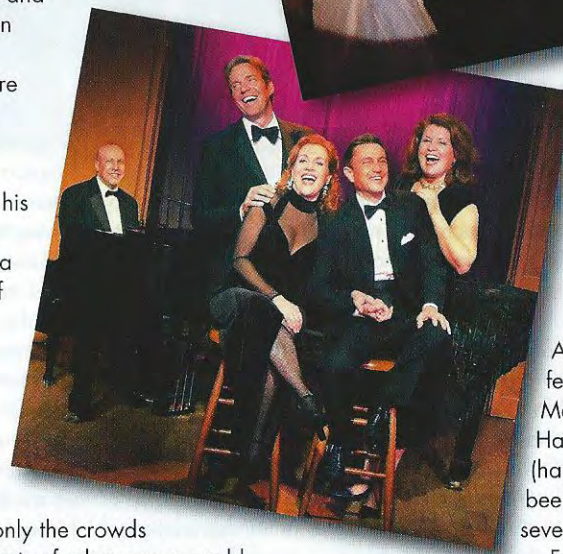
cheese sandwiches and drive from town to town to make it work financially. Brownville flies its artists in, puts them up, sells their CDs, and pays them for their performance. In short, it is a bona fide professional concert series—hours from any sizable city.

Atop a little knoll that looks down over the town and river, Jim installed his dream in an old country church. With the dedication of true believers, his group outfitted the church-turned-concert hall with a gorgeous little stage, two Steinway pianos, a sound and lighting booth and theater-worthy lighting. There are three shows one

weekend each month that pack the 150-capacity hall. Over the past 23 years, such veteran cabaret performers as Marilyn Maye, Julie Wilson, Eric Comstock and Christine



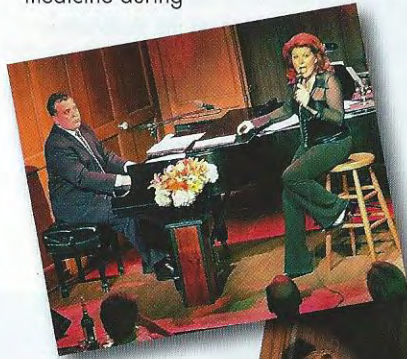
Above KT Sullivan & Mark Nadler
At left (L-R) Alex Rybeck, Todd Murray, Anna Bergman, Jeff Harnar, Klea Blackhurst



Andreas have been featured. Andrea Marcovicci, Jeff Harnar and (happily) I have been brought back several times.

For an artist, Brownville is an unusual experience. There's no private dressing room, there's no front desk with a concierge, no Starbucks within

walking distance, no room service and your bed won't be made when you get back from sound check...but you will get lots of heart. You will get a passionate staff to greet you warmly and is excited to have you; a soundman who will drive you to the nearest pharmacy to get some cold medicine during



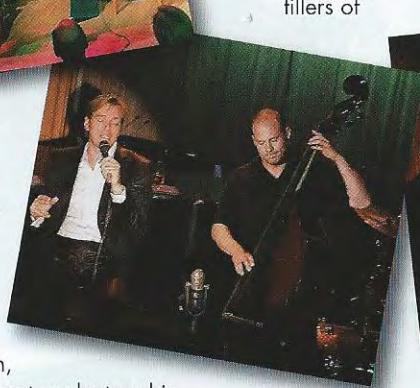
a break; a stagehand who takes pride in getting a side door to stop squeaking. You'll have sound and lighting man

Luther McNaughton, who drives two hours to volunteer his services and who runs his crew with precision. You'll have Haney, a stage manager extraordinaire. John Lauber, who is on the executive board, looks handsome and professional as the MC, greeter and house manager and, when the situation demands it, has been known to stock the bathrooms with tissue and bartend on cabaret nights.

Lauber has a local farm and is married to the ticket gal, Mary, who also runs a little shop on Main Street. For my first booking at Brownville some four years ago, I was picked up in Omaha by Chairman of the Board Barbara Moore, then greeted in town by the box office manager and ticket taker Audrey, who is Barbara's mother, and the website and administrator Deb Joy, Audrey's

granddaughter. You get the picture. It takes a village.

Those running the Series are very "in the know" and inquisitive. I come from a similarly small town in Pennsylvania; and I don't know that there I ever had a conversation about Schubert Lieder, or Gustav Klimt, or the difficult economics of a small cabaret room. Not that my Pennsylvania locals are less intelligent, but they are busy with their own concerns. Heck, my little town voted against turning their one blinking crossroad caution light into a stop light, because "we don't want people to stay that long." (LOL.) The board members in Brownville may be tillers of



**Above (from left) Billy Stritch & Klea Blackhurst
Todd Murray & Mike Don Rebic & Karen Akers
An artistic view of the theater
A Christmas Show (L-R) Jeff Harnar
Alex Ryback
Klea Blackhurst
Anna Bergman
Todd Murray**

remembered the book I bought four years ago. There's also a riverboat hotel, a winery, a broom maker, various artists' shops and one restaurant called the Lyceum that serves very good food. The woman who

soil by day, but they are *New York Times* readers and classical pianist listeners by night. Maybe much of the mid-west is this way and I am the one who is in the dark, but it impresses me nonetheless. There is a HUGE used book gallery in town called The Antiquarium, where Tom the owner

served me dinner there later offered me a drink at Jim's house after the show, and served me breakfast again the next morning. Everyone I encountered enjoyed a good conversation. And, after a day or two, you get the scoop on the local drama. Frankly, it is fun, you feel welcomed and respected as an artist, but treated like a local.

The whole town seems to be working hard to keep the series going. Last year, when months of river flooding all but blocked patrons from getting to Brownville, the town and board rallied and the series survived. I was struck by one store owner who said to me, "I'm waiting until Sunday night to come to your performance. I heard the sales were a little less for that show, so a bunch of us town folk are coming so that you have a good house." They get it.



Jim Keene generally books the shows. I would say his taste tends to a more legit vocal sound in cabaret, classic American Songbook material...even operetta if you can work that in. But you "gotta have heart." Jim comes to New York most years to the Mabel Mercer Cabaret Convention to see what people are up to. It was there that he first invited me and my musical director Alex Rybeck to Brownville to perform. This show was to be my fourth appearance there and I found it an honor. Not to "blow smoke," if you know what I mean, but these people feed my soul. They are here for the love of art, the accomplishment of pulling off concerts

worthy of the Café Carlyle in a Wyeth pastoral setting, thanks to that good ol' American commitment, "If I said, I'll do it, I'm gonna do it." Brownville is just a stone's throw from the "Show Me State" and now I get what that means.

You can see how personally rewarding it is for them—to create this musical showplace, to give back to their community. It's clear that without Jim, his wife Ruth, Jan, John, Mary, Haney, Luther, to name but a few (all volunteers and contributors), many of the landlocked locals would be hard pressed to



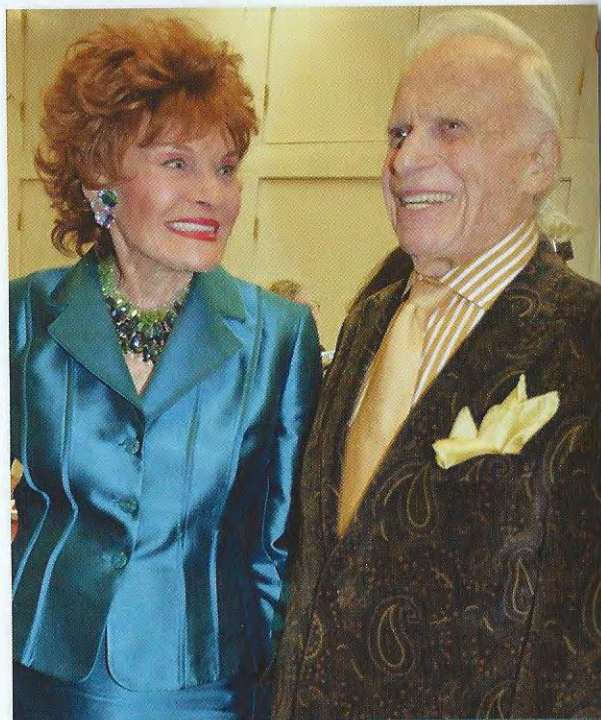
experience the enthralling cabaret shows we can take for granted on the coasts. The *Brownville Concert Series* will offer nine different shows in their forthcoming 24th season. They built it, and the people did come. And my note to you singers out there: If you get an invitation to perform in Brownville, clap your hands and go. o

Editor's Note:
This season's series includes Carole J. Bufford, Eric Comstock and Barbara Fasano, and the Christmas Gala with Liam Forde, Marissa Mulder, Marissa Miller and Nicholas Christopher. For details, visit brownvilleconcertseries.com/2014-concert-season

Celebrating a Musical Legend **Ervin Drake** at 95

Landmark

on Main Street was the site of the star-studded celebration of songwriter Ervin Drake, in honor of his 95 birthday. The evening was hosted by Charles Grodin with musical direction by Jon Weber and performances by Dee Dee Bridgewater, John Gabriel, Eric Yves Garcia, Anita Gillette, Jeff Harnar, Christine Lavin, Sidney Myer, T. Oliver Reid, Steve Ross, KT Sullivan, Stacy Sullivan, Leslie Uggams and Sal Viviano. The event was a benefit for Landmark and Gold Coast Arts Center, two non-profit organizations in the Town of North Hempstead, NY, where Ervin and Edith Drake have lived for many years. ○



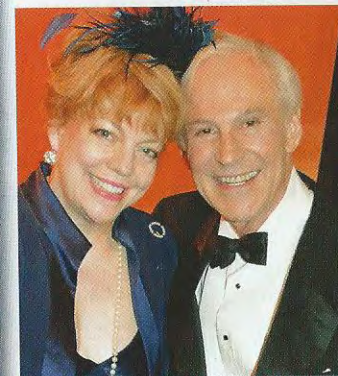
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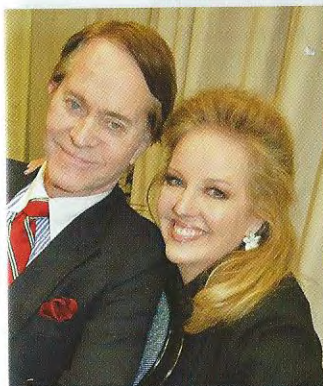


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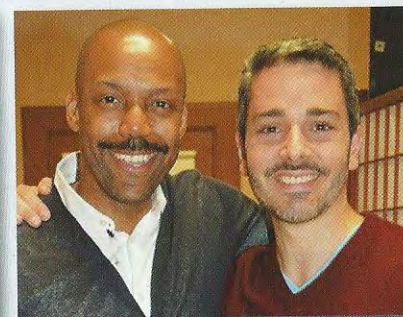


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Photos: Rose Billings



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1. Edith Drake
Ervin Drake
2. Jeff Harnar
Leslie Uggams
Stacy Sullivan
3. Dee Dee Bridgewater
T. Oliver Reid
Sandi Durell
4. KT Sullivan
John Gabriel
5. Steve Ross
Stacy Sullivan
6. T. Oliver Reid
Christine Lavin
7. Christine Lavin
8. Ervin Drake
Jon Weber

Mark Nadler

In His Own Words

By Barbara Leavy

When Mark Nadler boarded the Queen Mary 2 in May, both he and the ship had reason to celebrate. The QM2 is this year celebrating its tenth anniversary. Mark had just completed a packed-house run of his show *Runnin' Wild: Songs & Scandals of the Roaring '20s* and had been nominated for a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Revue for *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*. The journey from New York to Southampton was a benefit cruise for the Mabel Mercer Foundation and Mark would be entertaining along with KT Sullivan and Steve Ross, with lectures by Rex Reed. This was a good time to catch up with Mark.

Barbara Leavy What have you been doing since that Philadelphia gala that *Cabaret Scenes* did a feature on?
Mark Nadler That evening, three-and-a-half years ago, was one of the greatest and most thrilling of my life.

These pages
Mark Nadler
celebrates
his 50th birthday
at New York's
The Town Hall

Photos this spread: Stephen Srokoff

Doing an ENTIRE two acts with the New York Pops—a 75-person orchestra—not only accompanying me, but playing MY arrangements in front of 6,000 people who were in attendance—well, that’s going to be a pretty tough one to beat.

I will say that my 50th birthday celebration came close. That was the night that I shared the Town Hall stage with Chita Rivera and Bill Cosby and we raised over 100,000 bucks for Art Start (my charity of choice).

This page (from top)
Opening night of *I'm a Stranger Here Myself* at The York Theatre: Mark Nadler with Tommy Tune and Dr. Ruth Westheimer

Stranger Team: Jessica Tyler-Wright, Mark, David Schweizer (director of the show), Franca Vercelloni

Art Start: MN at The Town Hall with Chita and friends

Still at Art Start: Nadler with Chita Rivera and Bill Cosby

Opposite page (from top)
(L-R) Steven Berkoff, Mark and Sir Ian McKellen at The Crazy Coqs

Nadler with Karen Akers and Charles Strouse
MN Performs at 54 Below
Mark tickling the ivories for Heather Mac Rae at Sardi's

That evening after the show, I walked to Sardi's where there was a huge birthday party waiting for me. I remember that, as I walked, I was singing to myself: "Tonight I really feel New York is my personal property...." (You know, that song from the film of *Sweet Charity*? Well, Dorothy Fields's lyric truly expressed how I felt that evening.)



That was also the night that I debuted some of the material from my show *Crazy 1961*, which I then did at the Laurie Beechman [Theatre] later that winter. That turned out to be one of my favorite shows and one that I do and have done all over the world...

well, all over the U.S and in Australia. After *Crazy 1961*, I reprised and revised *I'm a Stranger Here Myself* and we know what happened with that. And then there's my current show, *Runnin' Wild: Songs & Scandals of the Roaring '20s*,

which is based on a show I did 14 years ago at Arci's.

I've reworked a lot of it and added a clarinet and trumpet, so it's very much a new show.

I've also put together a show with Heather Mac Rae and Nancy McCall, one with Marta Sanders and

Sandra Reaves-Phillips,

and a Christmas show with Marta, Heather, Tanya Holt and Jamison Stern.

I did a concert at The Mann Center the year after the concert you saw, with Marvin Hamlisch conducting the Philadelphia Pops and co-starring Martin Short, Brian Stokes Mitchell and li'l ol' me. I've ALSO put together annual benefits for Art Start, the last of which was at Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall, with a fabulous array of stars including Marta, Sandra, Lauren Fox, Sean Young, Tovah Feldshuh, Eden Espinosa and André De Shields. Each of my Art Start benefits has featured teens I work with who are in alternative-to-incarceration programs. They write and perform hip-hop/rap verses to songs of my choosing from the worlds of Broadway and the Great American Songbook. My favorite was



when they wrote their verses to "If My Friends Could See Me Now," which they performed with me and Chita Rivera at The Town Hall. Chita was so game and so great with the kids and we rocked the roof right off of Town Hall that night!!

BL Tell us about how you conceived *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*. Did it end up being everything you wanted it to be?

MN *Stranger* took a long path to get to where it ended up. It started when I told a friend named Billie Biderman the story of how my grandmother got our family out of Germany in 1940. Billie said, "That's an incredible story; you should really do a show about it." I stored that in the back of my mind. KT was booked at Café Sabarsky at The Neue Gallerie

and had to cancel, so she asked me if I'd fill in for her. (I was a logical choice, because I already sang in French and German and they like the shows to be international at the

Please turn to page 64

Mark Nadler

Continued from page 55

shows to be international at Sabarsky.) So, I quickly put together an evening of German and French songs that I knew—really focusing on the music from the songwriters of the Weimar Republic and weaving in my grandmother’s story. This was 2006 (I think). It was very successful and Sabarsky brought me back to do it again the following season.

...the fact that I focus on Jewish and/or gay people is not a coincidence.

Now, cut to 2012. The Adelaide Cabaret Festival in Australia was bringing me back for an unprecedented fifth time. They never bring people back that often, but they’ve fallen in love with *The Broadway Hootenanny*—the thing I used to do at Sardi’s—and, so, to get more bang for their buck, they always have me do one of my shows. They wanted something that was more serious, not so comic and hopefully more European in flavor. I remembered *Stranger* and asked if they’d like it and that’s the show they booked. I had LOTS of changes I wanted to make on the show from its original version. When I first did it, I threw it together pretty quickly. I needed to absolutely solidify all the themes and make sure that there was nothing extraneous in it. I got rid of songs that were there just because I knew them and carefully chose songs that better fleshed out the stories I wanted to tell. I added an accordion and violin to give it a more middle-European sound. At Sabarsky, I’d done it solo—just me at the piano. I did a lot more interweaving—stories and themes coming

and going and complementing each other so, at the end, it all comes together in unexpected ways and makes the audience feel like they were at something that is completely cohesive.

The show was a monster hit when I did it at Adelaide. So much so that it was nominated for the Helpmann Award—the Australian version of the Tony Award. (I flew to Sydney last summer and attended the televised ceremony, which was held at the Sydney Opera House. Thrilling!!) It was so successful in Adelaide that I decide to do it here and booked it at 54 Below. I was glad I did, because it was extremely well-received and I was given the Nightlife Award for it.

BL There is a fine line between cabaret and theater. How do you see that line?
MN When reviewing *Stranger for The New York Times*, Stephen Holden wrote that it should be a theater piece. The York Theatre agreed and that’s how it became an off-Broadway show. The trick there was to make it different enough from what I did at 54 Below that it would, indeed, be seen as “theater” and not “cabaret.” Otherwise, the *Times* couldn’t review it again and, without a *Times* review, it’s pretty hard to sell the number of seats one needs to sell when doing a show eight times a week in an off-Broadway theater. Jim Morgan of the York brought in David Schweizer to direct it at the York and together we worked very hard to make it a piece of theater without losing the integrity of what makes it work in the first place—the fact that I’m talking TO the audience the whole time (dangerously “cabaret” rather than theater).

Frankly, I don’t really see any distinction between “cabaret” and “theater,” except for the building in which the piece is performed. All of my shows have a theatrical element. That’s the fun of it for me—trying to make as fully fleshed-out a piece as possible. I never just throw together some songs. Even if there’s no patter at all, as with KT’s and my Cole Porter show—well, almost no patter—the songs are strung together in such a way that a narrative is created and the show is

carefully staged with as many theatrical elements as possible. ANYWAY, we succeeded in turning it into “theater,” because the *Times* DID review it again—positively!—and it was nominated for a Drama Desk Award in the category of Outstanding Revue.

Am I completely happy with the piece as it stands now? No. Of course not. There are ALWAYS things I would change in any of my shows. But when the deadline hits, you’re done and that’s it. I’m EXTREMELY pleased with the way that this show truly touches people. Deeply. I wouldn’t change that!
BL Aside from the glorious songs of the Weimar period, is there anything else about that time that you relate to, that influenced the show?

MN There’s SO MUCH about that time and place that I relate to. Obviously, to anyone who’s seen the show, the fact that I focus on Jewish and/or gay people is not a coincidence. But it’s the fact that up until the Weimar Republic and immediately afterward, the very people who were most celebrated during the Weimar Republic—many of them Jewish and/or

gay—were ostracized or worse in Germany. The Weimar Republic feels like a huge vindication for those of us who’ve always felt on the fringe, simply because of who we are and what we are. Also, I love all the sex and danger!

BL Is it a big jump from that show to one about the jazz age? Is there a special connection for you?

MN I wrote the current show with Hope Hardcastle 14 years ago. I wrote it because I was annoyed with all of the people (including critics) who didn’t seem to understand the undercurrents of the 1920s as



Above Mark at The Mann Center with Marvin Hamlisch conducting the Philadelphia Pops
At left On his way to The Helpmann Awards with Lady Annie Fox (award-winning Australian TV writer) I understood them. There were two shows based on the poem “The Wild Party” that came out that year—one with music by Andrew Lipa that played at Manhattan Theater Club and one with music by Michael John LaChiusa that played on

Broadway. I LOVED these shows—particularly the Broadway one—and I couldn't understand why the show was so hatefully panned and why people weren't flocking to see it. I had the thought at the time that, because so many of our grandparents were in their prime during the '20s, perhaps people didn't really realize how wild everything was. So I decided to put together a show wherein every song would be about sex, drugs or booze and all the stories would show how wild it really was. Much wilder than either *Wild Party!*

Last year when I played *The Crazy Coqs* in London, Ruth Leon, who books the room, was looking at the list of shows I'd done and she decided that this would be the perfect show for that room. Again, there was a LOT of reworking to be done from when I did it 14 years ago. I've grown a lot in my understanding of what makes a show work since then—to say the least! The thing is, I didn't HAVE the show to rework it. I had hired Maryann Lopinto to video the show at Arci's and I couldn't find that damn video ANYWHERE in my house. Luckily, Maryann keeps EVERYTHING and

**Below
Family Portrait:
Dominic Meiman,
Mark and Banjo
the Wonderdog
And
HAPPY
BIRTHDAY**

she transferred the video to DVD and gave it to me. WHEW!

So, the show was a hit in London—rave review in the *London Times*. And THIS year, when Adelaide came a-calling again, this is the show they wanted. Because I'm going to be doing it in a pretty large theater—400 seats—I decided to add a clarinet and trumpet to make it a bigger show and to separate it from the just-a-guy-at-a-piano, which is what the *Hootenanny* is.

As for the special connection, there are several. All of my shows have a secret under-theme, which I never reveal to my audience. It's a hidden thread that just makes the show that much more cohesive. In this show, part of that secret theme has to do with a Baptist woman who lived across the street from me when I was growing up, who tried to get me to convert to Christianity. I tell that story in the show. I'm sure the audience doesn't understand EXACTLY why that story is in the show, but I also know that, in including it, they get a glimpse of why I'm such a rebel and being a rebel is what the Roaring '20s—and the Weimar Republic! —were all about. ○



Editor's Note:
Visit www.marknadler.com
for Mark's schedule and information
on purchasing his CDs & DVDs.