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Andrea Marcovicci is boldly 'Crossing Time' at Davenport's



Vocalist Andrea Marcovicci premiered her "Crossing Time" show Wednesday evening at Davenport's.
(Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

By Howard Reich

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Cabaret singer Andrea Marcovicci has built a career performing shows structured around crisply defined themes, concepts or points of view.

But "Crossing Time," the program she offered in its Chicago premiere Wednesday evening at Davenport's, steered clear of any such dramatic device. Instead, it ranged freely over repertoire she has delivered since launching her cabaret career, in 1985.

Rarely has Marcovicci sounded better. Whether this was because she was liberated from sustaining an evening-length narrative or simply could sing more and talk less is open to debate.

Perhaps it had to do with the events in Marcovicci's personal life, which she shared with the opening-night audience: Her mother, a cabaret singer, died last year, at age 97; her daughter graduated college in May. These milestones led Marcovicci to select songs exploring multiple facets of life and love, the singer implicitly tracing her own story, but subtly and with nuance.

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Better still, Marcovicci sounded in far better voice than in some appearances here in recent years. She produced more tone with less effort than one might have expected, her low voice warmer and more appealing than ever. And though “Crossing Time” had its minor flaws, Marcovicci’s sheer joy in singing was palpable.

Early in her career, Marcovicci focused on torch songs, and she referenced that chapter of her musical life with four such ballads by Irving Berlin. Her timbre dark and her mood darker, she reveled in the sorrow of “Say It Isn’t So,” found drama in every syllable of “What’ll I Do,” conveyed profound longing in “Remember” and sang in full cry in “Supper Time.”

Yet from all this gloom and doom she switched breezily to Francesca Blumenthal’s “Between Men,” a brightly optimistic feminist ode to romantic survival. The exuberance of Marcovicci’s delivery pointed to a protagonist who refuses to succumb to defeats in the arena of love, preferring to make the most of every breathing moment.

The most openly emotional passages in “Crossing Time” came with “Take Me in Your Arms,” notable for Mitchell Parish’s impassioned lyrics and Fred Markush’s rhapsodic melody. Marcovicci offered the 1932 tune in homage to her mother – for whom it was a signature – and sang it with the unbridled ardor we associate with vocalists of an earlier, less ironic era.

The fervor and conviction of Marcovicci’s delivery, as well as the high craft of the song itself, made this a high point of the evening, while also vividly establishing Marcovicci’s artistic bond with her mother. No wonder “Take Me in Your Arms” won the biggest ovation of the night.

This show made a bit of musical history, too, when Marcovicci performed for the first time the program’s title song, with lyrics by Lesley Alexander and music by Shelly Markham, the singer’s longtime pianist and music director.

Every singer forgets a lyric now and then, but few can make a memory slip into an endearing little theater piece as Marcovicci did. Upon forgetting the words, she decided she needed to read the score but soon realized, to her dismay, that she lacked her glasses.

“Does anyone in the audience have a pair of cheaters?” she asked.

There were many volunteers.

Marcovicci donned the nearest pair and delivered “Crossing Time” with undiminished eloquence. The haiku-like simplicity of Alexander’s lyrics, paired with the storytelling quality of Markham’s music, made this an instant bit of musical theater. That the song traced the grand arc of a single life – perhaps Marcovicci’s life – rendered it all the more moving.

Marcovicci famously appeared in Joshua Sobol’s play “Ghetto” in Los Angeles in 1986, and she sang “Springtime” from the work, her ardent delivery of the Eastern European melody more persuasive than her Yiddish on this occasion.

And though one welcomed hearing “Audition (The Fools Who Dream),” from the film “La La Land,” the disarming simplicity of Emma Stone’s version in the movie made Marcovicci’s vibrato-heavy, cabaret-style delivery seem overwrought.

Still, “Crossing Time” showed Marcovicci in excellent form vocally and interpretively. In fact, she sounded as if she’s opening a new chapter of her musical life, piquing one’s interest in what may come next.

Andrea Marcovicci’s “Crossing Time” plays at 8 p.m. through Saturday; 7 p.m. Sunday; at Davenport’s, 1383 N. Milwaukee Ave.; \$38-\$43; 773-278-1830 or www.davenportspianobar.com.