

arts & culture

Studio Actor Shares His Bucket List At the Sharon

“Never Have I Ever: Songs from the Bucket List” was the latest show in The Lobby Lounge Cabaret series.

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND
Daily Sun Senior Writer

Russell Stephens is a man on a mission.

The musical theater actor is tackling his bucket list. He’s already completed quite a few goals, such as playing Cornelius Hackl from “Hello Dolly” and seeing a show in all 41 Broadway theaters. Some he’s even accomplished in The Villages, like performing as the Nazi Ernst Ludwig in “Cabaret” and, more recently, starring in his very own cabaret show at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center called “Never Have I Ever: Songs from the Bucket List.”

In “Never Have I Ever,” Stephens took patrons on a musical journey through the shows he has yet to do — some of them, at least.

“This bucket list is very extensive,” Stephens said. “I’m not going to take you though all of it, because we would be here until approximately August 2029.”

With music director Gary Powell at the piano and theater organ, Stephens sang a variety of tunes both obscure and popular. The set list included songs from blockbuster shows like “Les Misérables” and “The Phantom of the Opera,” as well as lesser-known shows like “The Music Man.”

Stephens started the show off with “I Am What I Am” from “La Cage Aux Folles,” which he also sang during his brief appearance in Significant Productions’ staff talent show called “Significant Talent.”

Significant Productions is the 501(c)(3) theater productions company that oversees The Sharon and The Studio Theatre Tierra Del Sol. When not dazzling people on stage, Stephens works as the organization’s grant writer.

Whitney Morse, SigPro’s artistic director as well as the granddaughter of The Sharon’s namesake, joined Stephens on stage for two duets: “Gus: The Theater Cat” from “Cats” and “Notice Me, Horton” from “Seussical The Musical.” The first song was met with tittering from the crowd, as Morse notoriously loathes the play.

“I’ve never met anybody who is on the fence about ‘Cats,’” Stephens said. “You either really love it or you really don’t.”

Feline imagery aside, Stephens chose “Gus” because it’s about people who have spent their entire lives in the theater. Which, Stephens said, is what he and Morse want to do with the rest of their lives.

Each song was accompanied by either a fun fact about its creation or anecdote about Stephens life. He used “Stars” from “Les Misérables” as a segue to talk about growing up in Huntsville, Alabama, and “The Music of the Night” from “The Phantom of the Opera” to discuss the theatrical British Invasion.

The show reached its most poignant moments during the latter half, when Stephens dedicated two songs to his mother. Together, they have traveled throughout the Southeast, visited New York on more occasions than Stephens can count and seen numerous Broadway shows. But those times are drawing to a close.

“Unfortunately, my mom’s getting to the point where her mobility is very limited,



Joseph Cooke | Daily Sun

Russell Stephens performs songs in the Lobby Lounge Cabaret series, “Never Have I Ever: Songs from the Bucket List” on Sept. 17 at The Sharon.

and she’s probably not going to be able to travel anymore,” Stephens said. “I said, ‘OK, let’s do one last trip to New York City, so it’s on purpose, and make it a trip for the ages.’”

Stephen is taking his mother to see “The Great Gatsby” and “Our Town,” which are her favorite shows, on Broadway. He’s also taking her to see “Cabaret” for the first time and, as a surprise, to Radio City Music Hall, where Barry Manilow will be playing.

It’s with this in mind that one of his last songs was Manilow’s “I Write The Songs.”

“Climb Every Mountain” from “The Sound of Music” was the last song Stephens dedicated to his mother. He did so in honor of a 2018 trip they took to Germany, where his mother was born, and visited the Von Trapp palace. While exploring the grounds, she roped him into an impromptu concert in front of a group of strangers. “I think that was my mom’s way of telling me that even if

that trip was more or less the end of her bucket list, that it could and should be the beginning of mine,” Stephens said. “And that while I can, I need to get out and do the things I want to do and see the things I want to see.”

The song earned Stephens a standing ovation, with many exclaiming how much they enjoyed the show.

“It was tremendous,” said John Higbee, of the Village of Belvedere. “It had a nice story line, and he sang some of my favorite pieces.”

There were also quite a few pieces that residents didn’t recognize, which John’s wife, Judi, and her friend, Linda Crews, appreciated.

Judi has performed in a few musicals, like “Guys and Dolls” and “Fiddler on the Roof,” so she was pleased to hear lesser-known songs from less popular musicals, like “The Greatest Star Of All” from “Sunset Boulevard” and “Send in the Clowns” from Stephen Sondheim’s “A Little Night Music.” Crews, of the Village of Osceola Hills, agreed.

“I’ve never got around to seeing them before,” she said.

Concert Band Shines Spotlight On U.S. Composers

The Villages Concert Band’s fall concert will be at 7 p.m. Oct. 3 at New Covenant United Methodist Church.

By MICHAEL FORTUNA
Daily Sun Staff Writer

Jean Butler had no trouble finding pieces for The Villages Concert Band’s upcoming fall performance called “Salute to American Composers.”

“Looking through the music, I thought, ‘We have so many good American composers, I’d like to feature them,’” Butler said. “I tried to think of composers that have really written and made major contributions to American music.”

When the 85-member resident concert band performs at 7 p.m. Oct. 3 at New Covenant United Methodist Church, expect to hear such pieces as Aaron Copland’s “Fanfare for the Common Man,” a tribute to Duke Ellington; selections from “The Sound of Music;” “American Folk Rhapsody,” a salute to George M. Cohan; “Irving Berlin’s Showstoppers,” John Williams’ march from the movie “1941;” “The Symphonic Gershwin;” and “Gee, Officer Krupke” from “West Side Story.”

“They’re all outstanding arrangements,” said Butler, of the Village of Glenbrook.

“I tried to find as many of the composers that people would know and associate with the theme.”

The band will feature the clarinets in Leroy Anderson’s “Clarinet Candy,” while the trombones will take the spotlight in Henry Fillmore’s “Lassus Trombone.”

“Leroy wrote so many novelty pieces, and we had done ‘Clarinet Candy’ a number of years ago,” Butler said. “I thought, ‘Gee, if we’re featuring the clarinets, let’s feature the trombones, because of Henry Fillmore’s contribution to the world of music.’”

The group also will perform “Main Street Celebration” by Steven Reineke, whose parents Bob and Norma Reineke, live in The Villages. The band has played several of his pieces through the years.

“It reminds me of the celebratory atmosphere in The Villages,” Butler said. “He’s one of the future well-known American composers.”

Donna Carroll, who plays oboe in the band, has enjoyed practicing songs like “Gee, Officer Krupsky,” “Irving Berlin’s Showstoppers” and “Main Street Celebration.”

“It’s just a lot of upbeat music,” said Carroll, of the Village of Glenbrook. “This is one of the best concerts, music-wise.”

Some of the pieces feature oboe solos, which usually go

to Susan Woloszyn. While she was up north, Carroll played the first oboe parts during rehearsals, then switched over to the second oboe parts.

“I used to be so nervous,” Carroll said.

Carroll, who started playing the clarinet when she was 8 but stopped after the 10th grade, had joined the concert band in 2005.

In 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Carroll switched gears slightly to learn how to play the oboe, taking lessons via Zoom for a couple of years. When the band returned to in-person rehearsals, Carroll joined the oboe section.

One of biggest differences between the clarinet and oboe for Carroll was the clarinet’s mouthpiece with a single reed and the oboe’s double reed.

“I swore if I play another instrument, it wouldn’t be another reed instrument,” she said.

Learning a new set of fingerings on the oboe also proved to be challenging for Carroll. Along the way, Woloszyn has become a benefit to her.


“She’s helped me improve my tone and do fingerings faster,” Carroll said.

Carroll has discovered that if a particular piece is fast, she tends to revert to the clarinet’s fingering.

“I haven’t played the clarinet in two years,” she said. “I don’t want to go back. I want the oboe’s fingering to be automatic. It’s taken me too long to get here.”

Tickets for the concert are \$20, and are available at ncumcfl.com/tickets or at the door.

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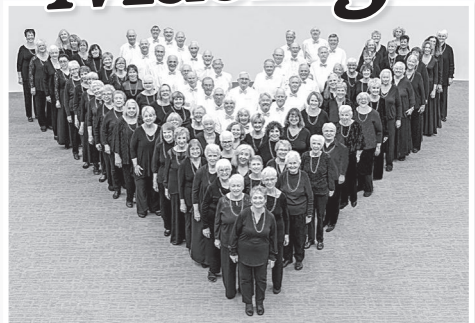
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