

## MASTER CLASSES and SONGSHOPS with CLAUDIA HOMMEL

Claudia's hands-on workshop is an opportunity for theatre and music students to strengthen their interpretative abilities in song. We work with singers at various levels of performance experience. We work with songs from any genre as long as there is a story to tell.

- This is a class of discovery and process.
- For each song, we ask the performer to explore the sense of place, character, poetry; to examine the specific moments and changes within the song, and in the process make the song their own. Auditors and accompanists are also actively engaged in the process.
- This is not a vocal technique class. But our work often clears up diction and physical problems that stem from lack of specific intention in the interpretation.
- This is not an audition workshop *per se*. Therefore, songs for this class do not have to be "suitable to your type" nor will they be coached to match a particular performance style.
- This is a class that uses the concept of intimate "cabaret" work (i.e., communicating "up close and personal") to enhance ANY singing.

### Choosing the performers

Do not limit the selection of performers to those with the "best voices". Strength of conviction and communication along with basic musicality is for our purposes just as important as quality or range of voice. There have been plenty of singers (Mabel Mercer, Lotte Lenya, Martha Schlamme, Julie Wilson come to mind) whose voices when beyond their prime still enraptured their audiences. How did they do that?

### Selecting the songs

- Songs for our class can be of any genre (opera, folk, art song, rock, jazz, musical theatre).
- The essence of most singing is story-telling. Not all songs are narrative, as in "I was lonely, we met, we fought, we loved, happy ending" and not all songs "move the plot along", but we will discover that most songs are about changes from beginning to end; an emotional discovery; or a music-and-word-painting of a scene or character in which a story is implied.
- We are usually drawn to a song by the way it "speaks" to us emotionally. Often times it is the melody that draws us in at first. Let's make sure the words are equally attractive. For that reason,

we'll forego songs whose main purpose is to get people up and dancing. That's a whole other story.

- The chosen song can be well known; it's the mark of creativity to make a popular song distinctly our own or to uncover new songs.
- We'll be looking for the humanity and humor in every song, even serious ones.
- The songs can be in any language as long as the singer can explain it word by word.

### Preparation:

- Each performing participant should bring two songs, one to present to the workshop and a second one in case, a) the first song is so spectacular there's nothing to add, b) it's so uninteresting there's no way to save it as a piece of theatre or c) we have enough time to work with both songs.
- Each student should learn the music and lyrics before bringing a song to class. It need not be memorized (a music stand should be provided) but we'll find that songs are easier to memorize as a result of our explorations.
- Claudia likes to have a hand-written copy of the text of each song (with name of composer/lyricist, publication date if known and its source if movie, musical, opera, song cycle). This seemingly simple piece of homework helps start the process.
- Bring 2 copies of the sheet music. The pianist will thank you for having the songs in a 3-ring binder or pages taped in series. Bring a notebook to write, remember and reflect on the process.
- Dressing for the part helps, too. Wear what you would to an audition.
- Since our approach is theatrical, the performer can think ahead "in character" for each song: What is the set-up for this story? Where am I; to whom am I speaking; what happened before this moment to cause my response in song? What is my next action? How do I feel at the beginning; what changes? Claudia uses a variety of theatre tools to draw out specific choices—including John Barton's text work from "Playing Shakespeare", Sanford Meisner's "in the moment" emotional work, Michael Shurtleff's audition guideposts for character work.
- Handbooks on acting are useful references for singers. Shurtleff's *Audition* gives shorthand cues to finding importance and specificity within a

monologue. Shirlee Emmons and Stanley Sonntag's book *The Art of the Song Recital* includes "The Unique Needs of the Young Artist" and "The Singing Actor". Uta Hagen's *Respect for Acting* is a gold mine of insights into character.

### **Other participants**

Singers may be accompanied by fellow musicians (on piano, guitar, accordion, etc.). In fact, we encourage it. The accompanists will be fair game as well. They can learn a lot about how to hold their end of the story and how to breathe and enunciate with the singer.

The auditors play an important role as well. Every performer needs an audience. An audience of one's peers can be the toughest crowd to win over. The audience should come with as open a mind as possible: embrace the effort, applaud the new discoveries, be on the lookout for the process and not just the end result. Auditors who are also singers will get a lot out of the exercise if they keep their own songs in mind as they listen to the comments. Finally, auditors are often used as "foils" and asked to be on stage to serve as the object of affection or derision, the sympathetic ear, the person to whom the singer is talking.

### **All in the timing**

For the master class, please allot 15 minutes for each singer (90 minutes would allow us a maximum of six performers). Where we have the luxury of time, we can work over extended periods up to three hours.

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### **Performance and academic background:**

Claudia Hommel brings to student and adult singers more than three decades of stage and song career. She approaches each student and each song with insights and energy that come from her own studies with international singer Martha Schlamme, actor/director Alvin Epstein, music director Steve Blier, voice teacher Roberta Vatske, various Shakespeare workshops, Art Song sessions led by Dalton Baldwin, Meisner technique studio work, and dance.

Claudia specializes in cabaret shows and recitals of French *chansons*, art songs, and American songbook standards—touring to performing arts centers, museums, universities and high schools from coast to coast, from Paris to Peoria. She is on faculty at the Community Music Division of DePaul University in Chicago.

Born in Paris, France and raised in Detroit, Claudia acquired a Masters in Library Science and worked as an archivist before going on to New York City to pursue a career in theatre and music. Calling Chicago home, she is a founding member of the Chicago Cabaret Professionals and is a member of the Actors Equity Association, Screen Actors Guild, and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. The Illinois Arts Council has selected her as an ArtsTour Roster artist since 1998 and as Arts-in-Education artist since 1999. She has presented clinic sessions for Illinois Music Educators Association. Her "Cabaret-Paree" recordings and the Jazz Fauré Project are available on the Maison Clobert label through her website at [www.cabaret-paree.com](http://www.cabaret-paree.com).

**Claudia's "Songsshop"** sessions (4 weeks or more at a time) offer us the opportunity to fine-tune, deepen and address more aspects to the performance process. They allow us to return to a song over time, to recognize and challenge the "easy" patterns we fall into, and to bring to our work more awareness of the changing times, from inside and outside the classroom. We create an environment of respect, a place to nurture confidence and risk-taking. Some songsshops conclude with public performances opportunities. The proof of progress is in the sustained ovations!



### **Cabaret project:**

An extended schedule will allow us to convert the song preparation process into a finished product where the participants put on their own cabaret. Regardless of musical genre, everyone can get into the act. Because intimacy is the hallmark of cabaret, the cabaret performance can take place in any space that allows direct contact between audience and performer.

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**Maison Clobert**

**PO Box 259327 – Chicago, IL 60625**

Telephone (888) 590-9360 toll-free — (773) 509-9360 in Chicago — Fax (773) 866-0863  
e-mail: [clobert@compuserve.com](mailto:clobert@compuserve.com) -- Web-site: [www.cabaret-paree.com](http://www.cabaret-paree.com)