

Start the roller coaster

Wild Yam Cabaret takes audiences on ride to explore the real person behind the image

by Jan Shaw-Flamm

Hold on to your seats. It promises to be a bumpy night when Wild Yam Cabaret performs in the mall at Victoria Crossing West this month.

No, there won't be anyone doing the cancan or performing as dancing yams, but there should be plenty of laughs as a trio of Twin Cities performers serve up their comedic portrayals of such female icons as Marilyn Monroe, Betty Crocker and Miss Liberty.

Wild Yam Cabaret is directed by Summit-University resident Eve Johnson Blackwell, who portrays Miss Monroe in the 20-minute vignette "Love, Marilyn." She also takes on the personae of Lucille Bjornstad, whom Blackwell refers to as the 1995 Megashopper of the Year, in "Lucille's Bargain Boogie," and of Miss Violet Larsen in "What's Wrong Here."

In addition to Blackwell's characters, the audience will meet Carla Vogel as Sandra Sandwich Shiksastein in "Freeing Miss Liberty," and Lynn Ruggiero as Betty Knocker, a woman in a never-ending search for the recipe for happiness, in "Betty's Backyard Circus."

The Wild Yam Cabaret takes its name from the herbal tea that is supposed to restore women's hormonal balance, Blackwell said. She likes to refer to the cabaret as a "roller coaster of modern dreams, fears and obsessions."

"Marilyn is our Aphrodite, the soft, receptive, sensual side of all of us," Blackwell said. "I want audiences to get a whopping dose of Marilyn, the woman they thought they knew and the woman they never dreamed of. The person behind the image is



Lynn Ruggiero plays Betty Knocker in "Betty's Backyard Circus."



Eve Blackwell portrays Marilyn Monroe in "Love, Marilyn."



Carla Vogel is Sandra Sandwich Shiksastein in "Freeing Miss Liberty."

more than we see on the screen." The intent is serious, but Blackwell said the style of the delivery is guaranteed to provide an evening of rollicking entertainment.

Blackwell was born in London, but has lived most of her life in the Twin Cities. She received her master's degree in theater from the University of Minnesota and has 25 years of acting experience in a variety of productions. Part of her training involved studying with solo performer Heidi Arneson, whom she describes as "a terrifically talented person who taught me to stage and edit and direct my own writing."

On one of her frequent return trips to England, Blackwell studied in a month-long workshop at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. She later got swept up in community

theater while touring the English countryside. Upon her return to the Twin Cities, she helped stage a play in the Whittier neighborhood of Minneapolis. The 1990 production, which involved 600 volunteers, included a racially and culturally diverse cast as well as blind individuals and people in wheelchairs.

"The play taught me that finding the creative part of each individual is a great unifier," Blackwell said.

Now Blackwell is concentrating on writing and producing her own work and encouraging others to do the same. She met Vogel and Ruggiero while working on the Whittier play and the three have been rehearsing together to develop their solo performances ever since. Blackwell said Wild Yam Cabaret fits in well into their goal of offering "a place where people pay to see a potluck of performances—acting, music,

poetry, etc."

Following the group's inaugural performance at Victoria Crossing, Blackwell said she plans to stage more cabarets in which other performers also can present their work.

"I know many people who write but never show their work and lots of people who used to dance," Blackwell said. "I want to offer a safe place for the closet writers and performers to show their work. There are always a lot of voices saying why you can't do it, that successful performers are somehow picked out from the crowd for success. I'm encouraging people to pick themselves to stand up and do it. The most exciting thing I've ever done is to write my own work."

Having previously performed in Patrick's Cabaret, Ball's Cabaret and other venues, Blackwell said she has been working for some time to present a cabaret in St. Paul. That desire dovetailed nicely with Merrie Stolpestad's interest in theater and her own desire to support the arts on Grand Avenue. Stolpestad, who with her husband Jim is in the process of purchasing Victoria Crossing West, said she had learned about Blackwell's need for rehearsal space and offered the use of the second floor of the mall. Stolpestad also agreed to host the group's inaugural performances. She said she hopes to bring other artistic events to the mall on a weekly basis now through the holidays.

Performances by Wild Yam Cabaret will begin at 8:00 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, November 10-11, on the second floor of Victoria Crossing West, 867 Grand Ave. Complimentary refreshments will be served in the atrium of the mall from 6:30 to 8:00 that night.

Tickets are \$5.00 in advance or \$6.00 on the nights of the show. Tickets for seniors are reduced to \$3.00. For information or reservations, call 699-4376.



The cast of Wild Yam Cabaret, from left, features Lynn Ruggiero, Eve Blackwell and Carla Vogel.

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