



## Academy's Arts Hall of Fame welcomes versatile stage talent Jim Caruso

by Joanne Braun Staff Writer  
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When Jim Caruso asked his parents for an agent when he was 7 years old, he couldn't have possibly imagined he someday would be imitating a feminine hygiene product. Caruso, a 1976 Sewickley Academy graduate recently inducted into the school's first Arts Hall of Fame, said his stint as a dancing tampon for the Kimberly-Clark convention in Dallas was his worst job ever as an entertainer.

"It was even more mortifying than it sounds, if that's possible," he said.

But, after living in New York for more than 20 years, the actor, singer, dancer, comedian and writer said he recently realized he is doing everything he always dreamed about as a child. Although it's not all nightclubs and razzle-dazzle, and there are many days of hard work, boredom and anxiety, Caruso said the good times seem to outnumber the bad.

One of those good times, and the best job Caruso said he has ever had, was working with Liza Minnelli in an award winning show that ended up on Broadway called "Liza's At The Palace." The Grammy nominated CD of the show is now available on iTunes, and the DVD also is available at Amazon.com. "I got to sing amazing Kay Thompson arrangements in the most beautiful theaters all over the world, with the best band, and three other singers that I love, with Liza Minnelli. Are you kidding me? I couldn't have made it up. Talk about showbiz!" he said. He met Minnelli the first year he moved to New York, 20 years ago, when the two entertainers started talking at the cabaret, Eighty-Eights. "We haven't stopped talking since. She is hilariously funny, startlingly normal and dazzlingly interesting. We've done many projects together."

Saying she "adores him," Minnelli's feelings about Caruso echo his about her. In an e-mail, Minnelli said Caruso is "a fabulous performer, wonderful producer and one of my favorite guys. For almost 20 years we've worked and played together in many different capacities, but sharing the stage with him is always the best. His musical ability, great humor, enormous energy, and loving knowledge of show business is inspirational and appreciated by anyone who is lucky enough to work with him. He has been terrific in any show I have hired him for, and has always received sensational reviews."

The son of musicians Pat Caruso of New Jersey and the late James Caruso, who died when his son was 7, Caruso grew up Wexford and attended North Allegheny School District. Then he "got wind" of Mario Melodia's theater program at the academy, where he attended high school. His best friend there was Anna Singer, now world-renowned opera singer and fellow hall-of-fame inductee.

Singer said she and Caruso, who started out entertaining as a clown at birthday parties, laughed a lot, watched the Carol Burnett show while talking to each other on the phone on Saturday nights and performed in local theater together. "I always thought he was brilliant. He could act, he could sing, he could dance--what one calls 'the triple threat.' I always thought he would make it to Broadway, and indeed he has." After graduation and going to college for awhile in Dallas, he found his niche in New York.

"New York is everything people say it is--there's an energy in the air that keeps me focused and interested and curious at all times."

He produces a weekly concert series called "Broadway at Birdland," which showcases Broadway performers and theatrical composers and hosts Jim Caruso's Cast Party, a weekly open-mic for Broadway and jazz performers also at Birdland. Cast Party has won several awards and has "become a New York institution" he said.

Over the years, Caruso has performed and continues to perform many concerts throughout the United States and London; recorded his own CD, "Caruso Live and In Person"; been featured on the small scene with celebrities such as Kathy Lee Gifford; written for theater magazines, interviewed celebrities for television, covered the Tony Awards; won numerous awards for his shows and was the founding member of the award-winning jazz vocal and comedy trio, Wiseguys, which performed at the White House.

He now is choosing songs for his new CD to come out this year, and will take Cast Party to Austin, Provincetown and Los Angeles at The Magic Castle in Hollywood on April over the next few months.

Caruso said he is proud of how he has managed to carve out a career in show business. "It's not an easy thing sometimes. The cabaret and nightclub scene is a very tough place to make a living." And, he said his advice to others who want to follow his footsteps would be--"Don't do it. It's too hard. If they decide to follow that advice, they didn't have the guts to do it anyway. If they look at me like I'm a crazy person, and forge ahead, they'll have the stamina to withstand the rejection, the bad times and the insecurities."