

The BROADWAY *blog*

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO THEATER IN NYC & BEYOND

By Tom Mizer

Once a month, a member of the theater community will pull up a chair to our cyber table and join us for a little conversation. I'll edit the transcripts (removing the truly libelous parts) and post the results here every second Wednesday. Without further adieu, let me introduce...

Jim Caruso knows how to handle a mic. Part bon vivant and crooner, cheerleader and coach, Caruso champions the Great American Songbook and the best singers in town as host of the weekly star-studded, open-mic spectacular Jim Caruso's Cast Party at Birdland. I caught up with the six-time MAC Award winner at a midtown diner and over a laugh-filled, dish-clattering lunch we chatted about his weekly gig, his dreams (hint: purple socks) and the life-changing influence of Liza with a Z.



What was the genesis of Cast Party?

I was doing press for a nightclub, which was as interesting as it sounds. It was a nightclub where nothing was happening so I was doing press releases for drink specials.

Your favorite being...

I couldn't have cared less. It was painfully dull. The nightclub happened to have a piano in the corner so I decided to throw a Christmas party so at least something would be happening. Everybody came and everybody stayed until 4 in the morning, singing around the piano. The next day, the club called and asked, "Would you do that every Monday?" I said, "No." And here we are.

Do you remember who was there that first night?

Billy Stritch took to the piano.

Hack.

Hack. No talent. Amanda Green. Natalie Douglas, the jazz singer. Dave Koz on sax.

These were just people you called up and said "Hey."

Well, they are all people that I hang with... around 30 people came and it was so much fun. And frankly, I learned from watching Liza [Minnelli] doing these parties every Saturday

night. She'd throw a party with people like Madonna and Streisand and Cy Coleman and Comden & Green...

Oh my gosh...

Me and Billy, Ann Hampton Callaway and our set. Plus Tony Bennett and Barbara Cook. Everybody ended up around the piano and it was so magical. It was never about showing off or singing a medley of their hits. Liza would say, "Tony, sing 'It Had to Be You.'" "Well, I don't know that song." "Well, sing it anyway." So Billy would be at the piano and these crazy things would happen. So I'd watch that and that's kind of how Cast Party came to be.

How do you create that feeling [at Cast Party] if you don't know people? What's your strategy?

I think part of the familial feeling comes from the fact that it isn't like *American Idol*. There's nothing judgmental about Cast Party. We can have Marty Short one minute and a housewife that wrote a song about eczema the next minute. It all works and nobody is making fun of the bad stuff. I mean, occasionally we all look at each other and we all know, but there's no booing, there's no judging, there's no "Get her off the stage!"

Given that you do have that kind of range, what has been the biggest surprise performance? Someone you thought, "There's no way?"

I remember a girl came in...at the end of the night. I had a list that was so full and she said, "Can I get on your list?" And I said, "I don't think I'm going to get you on." And she looked crestfallen, "I've just moved here and I want to sing my first night in New York. And I've been reading about this forever. So if you can get me on I'd be thrilled." So I got her on. She sang "Defying Gravity" and peeled the paint off the walls. It was just a great moment. She got a standing ovation and she stood on the stage crying. She knew she had come to New York and just killed. It was a movie moment.

I'm getting teary eyed into my orzo.

I know! There have been amazing moments like that. And she went on to audition for a lot of stuff and she's on tour now in *Wicked*.

Your best surprise guest?

My big crazy dream happened at Christmas; Donny Osmond showed up and jumped up on stage to join us on a Kay Thompson Christmas song that he knew, and had recorded a million years ago. He harmonized with us then jumped off the stage and ran out the door. I have it on video. Oh yeah.

So late at night you fire up that video...
Uh huh.

...to make yourself feel warm and fuzzy inside. Did you have the Donny and Marie album?

Albumssss. I mean I'm obsessed with them. It's my dream to one day be an Osmond brother. I love them. Love them. Can't help it.

I've heard your album, "The Swing Set." It's really lovely. Now that you're a big crooner, do you find that ladies are throwing their panties up at you?
Girdles, really. And a dance belt or two...

I think of you in some ways as Broadway royalty, like the Prince of Broadway...
Me?

You are.
I've only done one show!

Well, I just realized that. Your Broadway debut was in *Liza's at the Palace*. How did that feel?

Oh my God. I've been making my living celebrating Broadway people for the last eight years with the Broadway at Birdland series and Cast Party, so to actually be in a show was unbelievable. Of course, the show was thrilling. But to leave the stage door and go to Joe Allen with remnants of makeup and my hair slicked back from the show—and there was no unslicking it—and people saying you were great. I'll never forget it as long as I live. It was...to say it was the highlight of my life was an understatement.

Would you like to do it again?
(emphatically) Yes. (laughter)

You've got an eye on a particular project?
The Nick Adams role in *Priscilla*. I can see it. I saw the show last night and actually went home and did sit-ups. I did about eight.

I was doing them in my seat.
Crunches. I texted Nick afterward and said, "I'm doing crunches." How can you not?

How did you originally meet [Liza]? Because it sounds like you had a long term friendship before all of this...
Twenty years. Billy Stritch, my best friend...was playing at a piano bar called Bobo's. He called me and said, "You're not going to believe this. Liza Minnelli just came in and sat next to me while I was playing the theme from *The Bad and the Beautiful*, her Dad's movie." They started talking. She said, "I'm gonna come see you at Eighty Eights tomorrow night." And I said, "Billy, Liza Minnelli is never going to come to Eighty Eights..." "Come, just in case." So he stations me by where she's supposed to sit and she comes in with ten people...It's like this is really happening! After the show, everyone was up talking except Liza and me. And I turned to her and said, "Thanks for coming to see my friend. He's over the moon that you are here." She said, "What is this circuit? Who are you people?" She didn't know about that world. We took her to a party that night with Ann Hampton Calloway, Sharon Douglas, all these incredibly talented people...this whole world she knew nothing about and we became really good friends. And then she hired my trio [Wiseguys] to open for her for a while. She's just been unbelievable...she changed everyone's lives.

It's a testament to her that she was so curious.
She didn't know these people. She hung out with famous people like Michael Jackson and Elizabeth Taylor. She couldn't believe all these people. "So now we're going to go to The Five Oaks on Monroe Street." A toilet. And extraordinary people would get up and sing.

A lot of those places were toilets.
That's what was good.

I miss the toilets.
I smell a title. "Jim Caruso Misses Toilets."

I think we've got the headline for the article.
"Whatever Happened to Toilets?"

Was theater or show business a part of your family in any way?

Yeah. Both my parents were musicians. My mother still plays. I had an act with my mother. She played piano and I sang and the act was called "Son of a Bitch." And we played Happy Hours in fish restaurants.

Oh yes! Is there a chance that might be resurrected for just one night?
Not a chance in hell. She actually came to Birdland this last Monday and played great. People started chanting, "Son of a Bitch. Son of a Bitch."

It's better in memory.
The concept is great. The follow-through...not so much. She only plays ballads, so we were like The Judds on lithium. They weren't happy Happy Hours.

What's next?
Modeling. Elbow modeling. Cast Party is going to Pittsburgh on April 20. Las Vegas is looking promising for August. You know, my friend Donny Osmond lives there. (laughter) And my friend Barry Manilow. (more laughter) If I could get a night of Donny Osmond and Barry Manilow...

I might fly out just for that.
Can you imagine? Neither one has said they would be there, of course. We're just putting it out there.

Like Oprah. Like *The Secret*.
I just watched her show from Australia, and she had a regatta of thirty boats with her name on it. I want a Cast Party regatta.

Done.
I don't think it's too much to ask.

I can see a Cleopatra down the Nile entrance for you. Down the Hudson.
Ewww. Can you imagine? I love taking Cast Party everywhere, though. It's such a kick and a half for Billy and me. There is great talent everywhere, and we love hawking it! And *that's* your title!

Join the Cast Party (and get your name on the list to sing) every Monday night at 9:30 at Birdland in NYC.