

## E. E. POETRY IN PERFORMANCE

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Performance poetry, move over—make room for Stephen Scotti. The Cambridge-born, North End-bred, showbiz pianist may even be Broadway bound.

Composer, arranger, performer, Scotti recently completed performances of *e. e.*, his musical work celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the birth of E. E. Cummings. Scotti played on Martha's Vineyard and at Boston University, bringing cabaret to the inner sanctum of modern poetry and projecting it across the footlights in song and dance.

Scotti's musical work may be the ultimate theatrical romp in the new art of performance poetry currently on the upswing from New York to San Francisco, from Chicago to London, from London to Paris.

Scotti's revue skips, hops, and bumps like a variety hall show but with the hidden beat of the famed poet Cummings, also Cambridge-born, who wrote vernacular poetry with quirky typography. Scotti may even get an album or a hit tune out of the jazzy verse of this American original.

"To me the song," says Scotti, "is the distillation of truth with the right selected word and the right selected melody. That is reality. The rest of the time is unreal."

It's a long way from the one-dollar-a-poem arrangements that this fifty-nine-year-old player and Boston University alum used to play on Beacon Street in the old days, to the money he is now making on Cape Ann and Gloucester tuning Arthur Fiedler's old Chickering piano—and everybody else's.

The dollar arrangements were for Solomon Stein, a cigar-smoking entrepreneur with a second-floor walk-up, who advertised in women's magazines, offering to set their poems to music, a new twist on "Tin Pan Alley."

Stein charged twenty-five dollars for the arrangement and sent the women recorded copies of their poems, complete with singer and a piano accompaniment. He recorded on an old Wollensack tape machine and paid Scotti one dollar per arrangement.

"One week I made ninety dollars," says Scotti. "It was very good training for rhythm, scanning, and accent. There was no leeway. No matter how bad the poem, you couldn't change a word. That's when I learned what a complete mistress music was."

This crafty *paisan*, whose folks came from a village outside Naples, started his musical career on the mandolin and accordion on Hanover Street in the North End. Next came the piano and the Gregorian chant with Ted Marier of St. Paul's Church in Harvard Square. Scotti soon realized he was a man with a musical mission. He had an ear for poetry—and knew how to pursue a poem across the boundaries of academia to the streets.

No deoxygenated university auditoriums or stodgy lecterns for him.

Scotti turns a poem into a performance. He even shouts poems on a three-foot megaphone from the stage and thumps on an antique, Italian, one-hundred-year-old accordion with a curved keyboard and a pungent, fluty tone. With the raspy baritone of a frog prince, he belts out the poem in a unique, declamatory style, taken partly from operatic recitative.

He sets up with other performers, the talented Kristina Martin and Hope Devenish Norton, who warble, mug, mime, and dance the poems of Cummings in duets and trios, as well as the standup New York comedian and singer Steve Sammeth, who recites in a way that could make a library laugh.

The Martha's Vineyard *Times* review of the October 1994 show in the Old Whaling Church said, "Scotti is a versatile and witty composer who uses every style, from opera, rag, blues and musical comedy to swing, pop, and even rock to capture the mood of Cummings' poetry."

The reviewer for the *Gazette* agreed, "All is beautiful, bawdy, irreverent and passionate, all that is playful, serious, silly, gifted and great in the work of the poet . . . came to life in the spoken word, in the silences of acting, and through the music."

An October-foliage audience had never seen anything like it and warmed to the mix of words, music, and show biz.

"I have never read his poetry," said one entranced theatregoer. "What a wonderful way to hear it. More people should know about this."

Herb Kenny, former Boston *Globe* editor of the Arts and Humanities Section and a Cape Ann resident and E. E. Cummings admirer himself, attended. "The American reading public has been bamboozled by T.V.," he said. "They no longer know what to get from a book. But Scotti projects a poem. The audience can live it."

The following week, on October 14, the day of Cummings' actual birthday, Scotti and his troupe again performed the show in the auditorium at Boston University before a large crowd.

Scotti is a Boston Music School graduate and says of his time there, "I had an incredible experience. I sang in *The Rake's Progress* with Igor Stravinsky, the greatest composer of this century, personally conducting. I also accompanied the Boston operatic impresario Sarah Caldwell. Leopold Stokowski

came and did Karl Orff's *Carmina Burana* with us, and then we took it to Carnegie Hall for its American premiere. I studied Hugo Wolf, Kurt Weill, Puccini—lieder, cabaret, and opera."

Scotti works his magic with others besides Cummings. He has set William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, and Bertolt Brecht poems to swing, jive, and jazz, and he is now looking at a couple of ballad operas with Cape Ann traditional ballads and an original opera libretto in verse by myself.

He continues doing church services or singing Cole Porter, Noel Coward, and John Latouche. This is a man who could bring a poem to a cocktail lounge and the dog would roll over.

He has the bejazz; he has the poems; he has the music; he has the performers. All Scotti needs are the full costumes and more complete scenery and lighting, and he and his troupe will be ready for a prize in performance poetry, a New York run, an album.

William Finlay, a ten-year veteran of the theatre division of Boston University, directed and choreographed Scotti's musical work. He had the stage brimming with business and bits through fifty-two numbers of E. E.'s verse in styles ranging from the border ballad to opera to jazz.

Finlay's direction is minutely creative and, as a specialist in combat and fight sequences, which he has directed for films and television, he has the stage bristling with facial takes and visual gags.

"This is the ultimate in performance poetry," Finlay agrees, though he admits the show needs beefing up before hitting Broadway.

"This isn't a reading," Scotti himself says. "It's not a recital. People don't know what to expect because it's poetry. But when it happens, they love it. It's a musical."

"There is another version of the show," Finlay says, "which includes trapezes, clowns, and stilts. This is based on E. E. Cummings' love of the circus. He wrote, 'Damn everything but the circus' [*Him*, I, ii]. Remember?" Finlay directed the circus version of *e. e.* for summer theatre at Union College, Schenectady, New York, in 1995. He says the circus version of the show is even "more magical" than the concert version.

"Now it's all gone," Scotti says of his early days with the accordion in the North End. "Tosi's on Hanover Street told me they scarcely sell any accordions anymore. First the affluent bought organs and pianos. Then the electronic keyboard and synthesizer came in. That was the death blow."

Scotti, who now lives on Cape Ann, adds, "I sing because I'm Italian. Italians sing about life and love, not death. Their songs begin in a minor key but always end in the major."

His own work is based on political situations and romantic idealizations of events and people. Scotti has performed his arrangements of the poetry

of William Butler Yeats and the lyrics and limericks of Edward Lear in England, in St. George's Hall in Glastonbury, a performance promoted by the international social-action Hope Foundation.

"I didn't do any paddywack songs," he says.

Also in the '80s, Scotti performed the Irish poet's poems at the Yeats summer school in Sligo. He had to tune the old German grand piano at the annual summer program himself.

He has also performed on RTE in Ireland, the Irish public broadcasting service, and at Celtic Interface, a festival in Toronto, where as an encore he sang a song of his own, an international anthem called "Burn All the Flags." The United Nations inspired the song because Scotti says all the different flags, like all the different languages, blind the nations to brotherhood.

"Burn all the flags," goes the chorus, "from here to Xanadu / Undrape the world / to free me and you."

There was also a thirty-six nation planetary peace conference at Convocation Hall in Toronto in 1985. After the performance, Richard Alpert, the alternative-consciousness guru from Cambridge, also known as Ram Dass, came on stage to embrace him.

Scotti's arrangement of Cummings' poem, "i thank You God for most this amazing day," was picked as the theme song for the simultaneous peace conference at the University of Toronto.

Scotti sings a lot of love lyrics, he says, "because of the old Celtic saying that goes way back. I heard it in my childhood. The only two things that remain at the end of the world are love and music. In the beginning was the word and the word was a sound. In the end is love and music."

*e. e.* had a one-night stand in New York a few years ago at the Mazur Theatre, done by Blue Heron Theater Productions under Ardelle Stryker.

David Forrest, then editor of the *E. E. Cummings Society* journal, reviewed the show, saying that it "goes beyond musical setting to become readings and interpretations of great intelligence." He added that "every college English teacher should have as a fondest wish that the students see this production."

Taking a poem out of the textbook context, away from the blackboard and podium, and cranking it up live is the Scotti trademark.

In October 1994 Scotti was broadcast out of Chicago on the *Studs Terkel Show* as a promotion for June Finfer's splashy *E. E. Cummings* centennial. The show, supported by the Illinois Humanities Council and under the auspices of Finfer's Lost and Found Productions, presented more than twenty performers from all over the world in an all-Cummings bash.

The shows in Boston and on Martha's Vineyard were sponsored by Arts and Society under the direction of Hartford-born John Crelan. The advisory

board includes John Drabik, Mary Manning, and Abby Rockefeller. Two patrons for the show were K. W. Angoff and Peter Fosdick.

The cover program had a new sketch of *E. E. Cummings* by the artist David Omar and quoted the Cummings poem, "who knows if the moon's / a balloon, coming out of a keen city / in the sky—filled with pretty people?"

John Crelan himself is director of the Boston-area nonprofit, tax-exempt group that is part of Community Interaction, Inc., which has promoted concert recitals and concert dramas in greater Boston since 1979. They have done over forty different living composers and writers, and featured more than two-hundred-fifty actors and actresses. They have been broadcast on WBUR and WCRB.

They also do the Bloomsday concert, the longest and oldest continuous celebration of the works of James Joyce in the United States. This has been featured twice on Cambridge Cable television.

Crelan, who now lives in Vineyard Haven on the island, graduated from Trinity College and taught at the University of Hartford. He worked with Joseph Papp, Lee Grant, and Philip Burton in New York, and is a satirical writer himself whose work has appeared in the *Boston Herald*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Cambridge Chronicle*.

For the Martha's Vineyard performance, the stage was set with a piano, three wooden high chairs, and a megaphone. Nothing else. Scotti, in a black tuxedo, his benign features like a pleasant Neapolitan with a short aquiline nose—somewhere between Mafia uncle and comedian, between an old street accordion player and a cocktail lounge piano player, a cabarettist, in fact—ascended the steps to the platform slowly, with dignity, bent over the big grand, hunched up as if an avalanche were about to come upon him from behind, and began to peck the light airy notes of the overture.

This was jazz, cabaret jazz, composed by Scotti, and if it sounded like anything, it might be Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*, Cole Porter, or John Latouche, but it had a breezy understatement that yearned for words and the lounge of a good nightclub.

This was not rigid music. It had that showbiz sound, as if Scotti were an old hooper, a tap dancer, a former carnival man, maybe a barker.

Stephen Sammeth, who has sung Cummings in Caracas and Bogotá and New York in its premiere, next entered. He is a cabaret and cruiseship man who has performed at the Russian Tea Room as well as in *H. M. S. Pinafore* (as Dick Deadeye) in New York and who works on the side for *Children's Television Workshop* and *Sesame Street*.

Wearing a dark serge suit, a blue striped shirt, and a red necktie, he launched the show with "O the sun comes up in the opening."

Sammeth's tenor is experienced and smooth, with a cabarettist's expressive power. He has the talent of a standup man who gets a laugh with his eyes and brows. He is a blond leading-man type, with a body a little like Fred Astaire in its litheness, and he is always moving on stage, not just singing.

What Scotti has done by setting the jivey words of Cummings to music is to create performance-poetry plus.

Performance poetry is the new movement of poets and entertainers who do more with words than just read at a podium or recite from a book. Performance poets, alive in clubs from Chicago to San Francisco, from London to Paris, at the Nuyoricano Club in New York, *do* the poetry.

They learn the lines, memorize the verse, get up there, and perform it. Patricia Smith, of the Boston *Globe*, is a leading interpreter in this area of performance art.

They use stages, lights—their voices, faces, and bodies—and strut, mug, shout, whisper, and sing their stuff. It is usually bare-bones stage stuff, but they have been drawing in new crowds. This goes beyond the type of readings at places such as the old City Lights Book Shop jazz readings of San Francisco Beat poetry.

It is performance, with rehearsals, memorization, interpretation, preparation, and subtext readings of poems that are projected for the public.

Slam poetry is different. Slam is unrehearsed, spontaneous, improvised standup poetry, usually in a contest forum where the audience holds up numbered cards, like at an ice skating contest, to indicate audience appreciation in numbers.

There is a lot of noise to slam. Content gets slighted for audience impact. Theatrical effects and emotionalism take over in an attempt to stir the audience. Verbal sophistication and techniques are not so much in demand as guts and display.

Performance poetry, on the other hand, with its careful staging, projection of text, and theatrical showmanship, is a real and disciplined art.

Scotti has outdone performance poetry and created something more. He sings the work and musicalizes the poetry. His performers bounce the words back and forth, segue from a sung ballad to a spoken poem, a spoken poem to a performed poem. Light, cabarettistic business, and playacting spot the whole performance. What with mime, playacting, dialogues, bits of business—its closest kin is old-time vaudeville, but it is really a new kind of musical.

The only other precedent is the work of Al Carmines, a talented New Yorker who used to stage ongoing shows at St. Mark's Theater in New York, and who did a variety piece staging Gertrude Stein's poetry in the 1960s.

Scotti's work is every bit as good. His music is better. Early on he realized there was good poetry out there in the world waiting to be set to music and performance.

The verse is the key to the performance. Not just a recital. Not just a musical tribute to Cummings. His stuff is alive. It belongs in the musical theatre, in the variety halls, in the nightclubs, but with all the class and level and dignity of major poetry.

In Edgartown, Sammeth stopped the show with the second piece, and then Martin and Norton joined him on stage. The brunette Norton wore toreador pants on her taut model's body. The blonde Martin wore a red satin top with shoulders and black pants. Both are lookers and joined Sammeth in the next number, a trio, called "sweet spring is your time," which Scotti had done as a popular ballad, something in the old-time style of Beatrice Lillie and Broadway.

Norton and Martin, both light sopranos, intertwined on "it was a goodly co" and other numbers throughout the evening, along with numbers with Sammeth, which included duets, trios, and skits.

In between, Scotti, always a character-and-a-half, carried the day with a gravel voice and declamatory style in a half-bass, half-baritone pitch that scraped paint off the piano. At one point he got off the piano stool, picked up a three-foot megaphone, and intoned the irreverent poem, "the first president to be loved."

"the boys i mean are not refined" was a no-holds-barred language piece with four-letter words never heard before in Edgartown's Old Whaling Church.

The first half ended with a shake-and-shimmy trio called "Jimmie's got a goil / goil."

Cummings' ear for American vernacular and his irreverent satire come through thick and fast, but so too do some of his great nature pieces about the world—"in Just- / spring," for example—and the love poems—"since feeling is first," for example, and "somewhere i have never travelled," one of the greatest love poems of the English language.

In between were major statements about America, such as "i sing of Olaf glad and big"—the conscientious objector who loses all but is "more brave than me:more blond than you."

Scotti ends the show with an ensemble piece called "love is a place," then does as an encore the great Cummings poem, "i thank You God for most this amazing day," with, in between, a poem on the accordion with Scotti in a blue spotlight as the old man of the streets with a hundred-year-old antique accordion with a curved fingerboard.

All he lacks is the overcoat, the monkey, and the silver cup, and the show wouldn't be worse off with a couple of more pieces on the accordion and maybe a poem accompanied by the mandolin.

People see the posters for the show and think it's a reading. . . . Too bad. Another deoxygenated reading.

"But this is a musical," says Scotti. "No one expects it. They all love it when they get there. But no one expects fun from poetry."

"There should be an audience of two thousand for this at a place like St. Mark's Church in New York, or even on Broadway," says director Finlay. "With its voices, choruses, singing, and choreography, this is a real show."

The audience drifted off into the Edgartown night after the show, back to their hotels, the mystique of the island whispering in the night, the lines of Cummings about "flowers picking themselves" seeming to fit the Vineyard's profusion of picket-fence gardens around the village, a dusky moon rising over the streets, the scent of autumn in the air, and the first fallen leaves rustling in the gutters.

This was the world enhanced by the Cummings lines "when god decided to invent," "next to of course god america i love you," or "Now i lay(with everywhere around)."

The audience headed back up Main Street thinking what Scotti is doing for poems, a believer who interprets the space of the poem, projects the sense of discovery and surprise of true poetry, of the diction, of the sense, into the audience space, the stage.

For them the poetry lived. And for Scotti and his brave troupe, it's all

*Another song, another sorrow,  
Another season, another dollar.*

—Boston, Massachusetts