

Joan Crowe

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Joan Crowe Finding the Balance

By: Peter Leavy

Considering the critical acclaim Joan Crowe has enjoyed – “fabulous,” “captivating,” “sheer joy” – perhaps the most interesting aspect of this statuesque vocalist is that she’s only recently come to cabaret. She readily acknowledges the uncertainty with



which she started on this new turn in her career only four years ago but almost from “day one” audiences were totally in her sway. Her very first solo venture, Shooting Stars, was a tribute to close friend and songwriter, Tom Brown, who had died of AIDS. Its objective was as much to help Joan deal with the loss as to test the waters in the intimate confines of cabaret. Nevertheless, the show evoked from Time Out-New York’s critic, the praise that it was “so thoroughly suffused with humor and the lingering warmth of their friendship that it manages to be moving without being maudlin, uplifting without being saccharine.” While she is, in fact, a Westchester wife and mother, Joan is no dilettante breaking the monotony of suburban life by assembling her friends and family for a night out at a New York boite while she performs. Borne in West Germany, raised in Indianapolis, and with a BFA from the University of Indiana and an MFA from the Asolo State Theatre in Florida, Joan headed for New York. Her own description is typically wry. “So I headed out to New

York with two useless degrees and a head full of classical training. I quickly discovered there was not a lot of work for Shakespearean actresses and that it was doubtful that any of the new roles would be written in verse.”

If Broadway failed to sit up and take notice, others were more astute. She amassed a string of theater and television credits during the years before she prepared Shooting Stars and took it to Don’t Tell Mama. Her acting resume would look impressive accompanying anyone’s headshots. Aside from Off-Broadway roles and regional and international theater, she’s worked in films for directors Allan J. Pakula, John Schlesinger, Mike Nichols, and has been seen frequently on television, including recurring roles in All My Children and One Life to Live. But in 1992, when she and husband Robb Pruitt had their first child (Robbie) Joan, who was performing almost until she delivered, pretty much retired and took on the mommy role for the next seven years. It was only when younger daughter, Marie, entered preschool that Joan’s longing to return more actively to performing became both practical and irresistible.

Revelations come at unexpected moments. Joan's was no exception. "Not everybody has a breast feeding epiphany, but I did. It's really related to why I started singing. You have a lot of time on your hands when you nurse your daughter in the middle of the night. I used to play a game where I would pretend I was an eighty year old woman, and would interview myself. Usually it was funny that late at night. But when I asked myself, if you had your life to live over again, what would you do differently? It was like a flash of light. What came into my mind was that I hadn't done what I really wish I



had: sing. At that time, I was close to forty and realized I had the other half of my life ahead of me. The next day I called up my agent and said, "I'm thinking about going into the cabaret." Why cabaret? For Joan, it's a question of equilibrium. "Here's the thing," she explains. "The biggest challenge that I find in my life on a day to day basis is finding the balance. I think it's the Masons who say you should devote a third of your life to religion, a third to family and a third to work. My daily struggles is balancing the requirements of rather young mommy-hood – my kids are ten and five, still in serious mommy mode – with the time and effort of being a wife, and of pursuing my career. I didn't feel I could go back to acting because I didn't feel it was mommy compatible. I wasn't about to go on tour, I wasn't going to do a play every night, I'm not going to go out of town. So I looked at cabaret very frankly as something within my control."

Seeking a good music director and finding Brian Hurley, she spent many months utilizing his talents as a voice teacher. "At the time I still was grieving for my good friend Tom Brown. I missed him and his music, so I thought I'll do a show, just Tom's music, as a cathartic, creative thing. Even if I didn't do it for other people, fine." But Brian Hurley was convinced it had a broader appeal, and *Shooting Stars* garnered a MAC award nomination for its excellence. It was a notable beginning and the critics who praised her had no reason to eat their words. Her next show, *As the Crowe Flies*, was equally successful and once again brought Joan a MAC award nomination. Joan's balancing act has gotten easier with both her children in school full time. "I work doing marketing and mailings and my own stuff in the studio in my house while their in school. I try to force myself to stop working by four o'clock when they get home." To make more time available, she gave up watching TV almost completely about three years ago, which allows a couple of extra hours a

day to devote to her family or work on her material. (Although she does watch *Six Feet Under*, which she calls "a soap opera set in a mortuary," because she went to school with its creator, Alan Ball.) The creation of the *Devil in Miss Joan*, yet another highly regarded cabaret show, is behind her so that it's relatively easy to take it on the road, as she has, and reprise it in New York. Her real efforts at the moment are focused on a new one scheduled for October. It's been a major research project. "I come from a theatrical background. I need a theme or a through-line to my shows. There has to be connective tissues; a beginning a middle and an end. I will never give that up. My new show has a "Broad" theme, pun intended. I've been spending so many hours in Lincoln Center doing research on this one" As many of her cabaret colleagues, Joan is quick to answer the call to perform for good causes. The new show was commissioned for a breast cancer benefit in Indianapolis, and is called *Women of Note*. "Right now I'm in the research and putting into folders stage. When I work on a show, If I don't have the date booked, my material folder just keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger. One of my biggest challenges is narrowing the field. So many songs...so little time. I mean in

the scope of a /cabaret show, you've got, what, thirteen? It's never enough. I always start with three hundred songs we are going to pick from. I'll bring it down to about a hundred numbers and go from there." The show is about women who've made a difference writing popular music to Joan, personally as well as historically. "Dorothy Fields was really a breakthrough. Before her, it was mostly black women. Ma Rainey, who influenced Bessie Smith, and Billy Holiday."

Talking about the new show indicated much about Joan herself. "Bessie Smith was a blues singer who had a huge sense of humor. I identify with that. I love to sing ballads and make people cry, but my patter leading up to that is sometimes very, very funny. I would never set up a ballad with a sad story. You want to make them laugh, then turn the corner and make them cry. That, to me is theatrical. If you've seen my shows, you know that most of my patter is funny. If I look at the percentage of comedy material to ballads, it better be weighted on the comedy side." Still, as firm as her view is of her own desires, she's a great audience for others. "I've totally enjoyed singers who don't talk at all, just sing and do it well. And I've enjoyed shows with heavy themes that have journeys that you go on. I'm not a critical audience. I can go to a bad show and find something interesting, even if it's only the costuming or the lighting."



With my teacher, mentor and friend, Julie Wilson.

As busy as she is on the new show or with her children, Joan makes sure that her balancing act devotes an appropriate amount of time to husband Robb. And when she talks about him, it's no secret that ten years into their marriage, the flame still burns brightly. They met at a college alumni acting showcase in 1989, and they haven't been far apart since. "He's an actor and an award winning screenwriter, she announces proudly. "He writes beautiful poetry," adding with a laugh, usually about me, because he has good taste. And he writes wonderful short stories for the kids." Robb's talents extend to screenwriting. A "really funny" six-minute film with a writing partner, called Billy and Bobby-the Hollywood Years won the New Haven Film Festival comedy short award, and the Sarasota Film Festival award for comedy short. Robb also did a twenty-minute film called The Big Day, which Joan points out just won an award at the Westchester Film Festival beating out his own Billy and Bobby. Their wedding in 1992 was very special, romantic and poignant. Tom Brown, Jon's long time songwriter friend, was in New York hospital in the last stages of AIDS. They had often talked about how they'd sing at each other's weddings. Robb agreed with Joan on a plan and overnight, everything was arranged to be married in the hospital room.

Tom's mother brought his tuxedo to wear over his hospital gown, his minister friend came to perform the marriage, and most of the nurses and doctors on the floor joined them in the flower laden solarium for the service. Joan describes how one day earlier, when she spoke to Tom to tell him of their plans, he had just had a breathing tube removed and was barely able to speak. At the wedding, as Joan describes the moment, "as if channeled directly from God," Tom sang, as promised, in full voice without a falter. When Joan recalled that in her tribute to him, she says, "there wasn't a dry eye in the house."

Following the hospital wedding, the ceremony was repeated in Joan's hometown of Indianapolis. "It was sort of performance art as we were already married." On their tenth anniversary this year, Robb surprised her by having their vows renewed at Park Avenues St. Bartholomew's Church, followed by a dinner for sixty at her favorite restaurant. Joan impulsively elected to use that occasion to give the first public

demonstration of her new pursuit, songwriting. That night she debuted I'll Be There, written for Robb to commemorate their anniversary and the years ahead. Joan's admiration for songwriters is pronounced. "It's such an amazing gift. And I appreciate it more than ever since I've begun to write my own material. I can easily come up with a melody I like, or an idea, but usually I have a good verse and a chorus and that's it. I don't like to repeat a refrain over and over. It's hard for me to come up with complete song. I usually have said everything I've felt like expressing in one chorus or two." Whether writing songs or performing them, Joan favors story songs. Possibly it's the actor in her. "They need a point of view and they have to speak to me. Songs that appeal to me are those where I can really connect with the subtext." To make sure she's conveying her intent to the listener, she'll wonder, "How am I trying to change you? How am I trying to affect you? What am I trying to get across to you about how I'm feeling or how you should be feeling?" She reveals one of her tricks. "I use action words. I'm going to upset you, I'm going to piss you off, I'm going to soothe you, I'm going to make you love me ... all those things. I've got a list to help me: provoke, inform, seduce ..."

How does Joan feel about her switch to cabaret? "We all do it for the love of it, not for the money. It's a wonderful medium. Truly, I do it because I love to sing and I love to perform and because I love building shows. I get jazzed in the creating part. When I've done a show ten or fifteen times, I'm over it. I want to do the next thing. I've been doing cabaret for four years and I've just started to break even. I'm feeling validated as a singer because we validate ourselves by how much money we earn. I've got a few corporate clients and I do private parties now and then – and my Westchester Counter lounge gigs help keep me in the black."

"A lot of cabaret performers don't like singing in a restaurant where half the people may not be listening to you. But I sing to the ones in front who came to see me. I don't care if there's a couple necking in the back. It's kind of cute. And it's my kind of gig, where I can sing all kinds of bizarre music, not just thirteen songs that I've done before. That's why my audience comes back. They like the dirty songs. They bring their friends back. They love Marcy and Zina's bald song. "You've got to hear this song she does about bald guys. It's so funny. 'Shattered Illusions because its' nasty. Phone off the Hook—Tom Brown's—it has an orgasm in the middle of it." If they're not Joan's usual crowd, she'll stick to the standards, and will do the likes of Ain't Misbehaving, Don't Get Around Much Any More, or Honeysuckle Rose. "I keep the dirty stuff toward the end if I think there are kids in the audience, or I won't put it in at all. I have a few funny numbers that are clean." She thinks for a moment. "Not many."

Like many professionals, and especially professional women, Joan's balancing act, while requiring a delicate touch, has worked for her. Only where her friends are concerned does she admit she's discontent. "Its hours in the day. There are so many things I want to do. The friends get cut out. I've kept up with those that really, really matter, by phone. And I take a few days and travel to see them. I'm going to Chicago to see my college roommate, Ilene, this summer. She's in real estate. I'm going to see Jaime, who's a director of fundraisers and industrial shows this summer also. And my friend Thom Kendall, who runs the Tamarind theatre in Hollywood. If Joan needs one extra thing to make everything ideal, it would be a few extra hours in the day. Then again, maybe she's working on it.