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Life is a Cabaret

A Tulsa native returns to take the stage for his one-man show.

JOHN WOOLEY



It's hard to say which is a longer stretch: from Tulsa to London, or from investment banker to cabaret star. Harold Sanditen, who returns to Oklahoma in November to play his first-ever show in his hometown, ought to know. He's taken both those journeys.

A member of the longtime Sooner State family that, among other things, originated and ran the well-remembered Otasco chain of auto-supply and appliance stores, Sanditen grew up in Tulsa, the city of his birth. And while he acknowledges that his time there didn't really foreshadow his later career as an entertainer – “I always felt slightly gawky, slightly effeminate, not really comfortable on stage or comfortable in my body,” he says – there were still a few clues if you knew where to look.

“I was in *Once Upon A Mattress* when I was at Memorial High School,” he recalls with a chuckle. “That would've been in 1973. I played Prince Dauntless the Drab, which was the male lead. And then I was in *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, but I only had chorus parts in both of those.”

Offstage, however, Sanditen's love of music showed itself in an unusual way.

“I had a player piano when I was in Tulsa, and I must've had 2,000 piano rolls,” he recalls. “I used to go to the Fairgrounds, to the flea market, and I'd go to auctions, and I'd buy all these piano rolls from the 1910s and the '20s and whenever else, and they really exposed me to an incredible variety of music.”

After high school graduation, Sanditen went on to get a degree in business administration from Arizona State University, followed by an MBA from the Wharton School. And although he performed in *The Wharton Follies*, which he describes as “a spoof of life at the business school,” staged briefly at the beginning of each term, that was it for the music part of his persona.

"I really just put it aside," he explains. "I sang a lot at home. I sang in the car. I sang everywhere I could. But I never sang professionally." He chuckles again. "I was too afraid to get up on stage."

"So I got my MBA, moved to New York and decided to follow the investment banking route. I did that for a few years, until I had the opportunity to move to London. It took a while to get a work permit. But once I did, I set up shop as a theater producer, and that's what I did for 20 years."

The jump from banker to producer, he points out, isn't as extreme as it might seem. He'd already invested in a couple of shows in New York, so he was familiar with how the process worked.

"It was far more creative, yes, and it gave me the chance to explore plays and musicals," he says. "My interest in the stage always came from music, but I only produced one musical in 20 years. It was a jazz musical called *The Slow Drag*, based on the life of Billy Tipton, who was from Oklahoma. We did it in London on the West End. I loved it."

As a producer, he adds with a laugh, "I got close to the stage without having to actually be on it. I was on the sidelines – anywhere but front and center. I'd always wanted to be on the stage, but I'd never really had the confidence. I had that horrible stage fright."

After a good, long run, however, Sanditen found himself staging "smaller and smaller things" as the business changed around him.

"The economics of producing weren't as good as when I moved here [to London]," he explains. "Ticket prices were going up, the costs of producing a show were going up, and I was pretty much a one-man band, because the shows I did tended to be things that weren't blatantly commercial but had some commercial possibilities. Those choices meant that you were taking a bigger risk of losing money."

He was producing a play in New York when he heard from an old Wharton friend named Simone Schloss. After a couple of decades of working and raising children, she was debuting her own cabaret show. Intrigued, Sanditen went to see the production, and, he remembers, "That's when the seed got planted."

Still, before he could think of putting together his own show, he was going to have to do something about his stage fright. He finally faced it at what he calls a "cabaret boot camp" in Tuscany, Italy, run by the American performer and teacher Helen Baldassare.

"It was a small group of nine people, and it was the best group-therapy session I've ever been to in my life," he says. "We'd meet at nine o'clock in the morning and cry until about one, and we'd break for lunch, and then cry from two to five."

Sanditen laughs.

"But I started learning what cabaret was all about there," he adds. "We had a group show at the end of the week, and we all sang three numbers, and I was so scared I was just shaking. But I decided at that point that if it was something I ever wanted to do, I had to just completely get over that. So I just didn't allow it to concern me anymore. I had other things to worry about, like scripts, things I had to say. I mean, I couldn't let stage fright get in the way of all the other obstacles I was going to have to be dealing with."

Just about a year and a half later, in September 2008, Sanditen did his first solo cabaret show, *The Secret of Life*, in New York, followed by a London engagement. Since then, he's created and performed a new production just about every year, gaining new venues and new fans as he goes along.

"Once I got the bug, once I really realized what cabaret is all about – the focus on lyrics, and the storytelling and how the songs relate to you – it just opened up a whole new world," he says. "It also made me realize that as much as I may have wondered why I never took the step to do it 30 years earlier when I was younger, I didn't have the world experience to really understand some songs. I'll be doing a Beatles song in Tulsa called 'In My Life.' That song is incredibly beautiful, but you can't talk about all the things you've seen in your life and what you've loved if you're 25 years old."

For his Oklahoma debut, he'll be doing selections from his two latest productions. One of them, *Shades of Blue*, has been recorded live on a new CD.

"I just did a brand-new show called *Full Circle*, and it was all songs from the '60s and '70s that were instrumental to me when I was growing up," he notes. "So rather than doing *Shades of Blue*, which is an intact jazz cabaret show, I'll do one set of selections from the CD *Shades*

of *Blue* and another from *Full Circle*, which takes me back to my days in Tulsa.

“That way,” he concludes, “it’ll be much more personal.”

Harold Sanditen’s Nov. 30 show is set for the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame’s Jazz Depot in downtown Tulsa. For ticket information, call 918.281.8609 or visit www.okjazz.org.