

## The Art of Cabaret as Philosophical Practice

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### Abstract

Cabaret, an intimate art form that utilizes songs, monologue, sketches, poetry, dance and humor to introduce commentary on actions, events, and life's emotional ups and downs, can also be thought of as philosophical practice when the topic under investigation is the virtues and their contribution to character development and the life well lived. The basic elements of cabaret that make it useful as a teaching tool are introduced and the reasons why the shows meet the basic requirements for twenty-first century character education are given, along with a brief description of the accompanying workshops.

**Keywords:** *archetype, cabaret, character, conduct, consciousness, musicophilia, myth, virtues*

### Introduction

Quintessentially the child of teeming cities, the cabaret was a space where those atomized flaneurs and artists eager for warmth, sometimes bodily as well as human, met to dream the different, and to laugh. So, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Cabaret ... — Appignanesi

The purpose of this paper is to describe and explain how the art of cabaret can be understood as philosophical practice. This journey of understanding starts with a look at the world of cabaret itself, including its history and various uses, as well components of cabaret, including story, humor, song and voice, that help make it a powerful vehicle of communication.

Next we will look at the virtues and their contribution to the good life. The rationale for the theme of the six cabaret shows discussed here, to wit the virtues as approached and defined within the field of positive psychology, as well as the reasons for using their particular classifications will be explained.

In the art of cabaret, the performer is the quintessential part of the show. Therefore, I will also explain my reasons for creating, producing, acting and performing these shows. Why have I learned to sing, act, perform comedy, and write scripts, all of which are necessary skills for the production of a cabaret performance? What do I believe their contribution to the art of philosophical practice in the twenty-first century to be?

Finally, I will introduce some of the techniques used in the workshops that accompany each performance. Not only do I wish to inspire and educate through the performances, but I want to expand the interested audience members' knowledge of the virtues by exposing them to practical measures they can use to practice them to a greater extent in their daily lives. Phronesis—practical wisdom—benefits from having practical measures.

A word about me before we begin: I am what is known in German as a "querdenker"—a person who thinks and jumps across lines and cross-pollinates. Therefore, you will find references to the world of philosophy, and also to those of psychology, biology, neuroscience, musicology, and storytelling.

## The World of Cabaret

“Cabaret performance is one on one, heart to heart!”— Julie Wilson

To many people, cabaret conjures up the images of dark, seedy rooms where the quality of the advertised performance rarely justifies the price of the drink. The film *Cabaret* added Weimar Republic decadence, satire, and sentimentality to the picture. In reality, cabaret’s roots began in late 19<sup>th</sup> century France and then blossomed as a medium for political and cultural commentary throughout Europe and the United States.

There are a number of structural elements common to the world of cabaret, including a small stage, a smallish audience, an ambience of “talk and smoke,” songs, monologue, sketches, poetry, dance, and humor. The relationship between the performer and spectator can be one of both hostility and intimacy, and there can be nodal points of participation and provocation within the performance.

Another very important feature of cabaret is the performer breaking down the imaginary “fourth wall” of traditional theater, playing directly to the audience instead of to the ensemble. No matter what is enacted, the performer remains a performer. By introducing commentary on actions, events and life’s emotional ups and downs, and by creating an intimate bond between performer and spectator, cabaret has offered, and continues to offer, an alternative to the large concerts and musical spectacles seen and heard so often today. Though contemporary cabaret in the United States is not particularly politically edgy, it remains “avant garde” primarily through its use of personal story telling, intimate venues, and breaking down of that fourth wall (Appignanesi, 2004).

## Elements of Cabaret that Make it Useful as a Teaching Tool

- **The Power of Story**

The telling of a tale links you with everyone who has told it before. There are no new tales, only new tellers in their own way, and if you listen closely you can hear the voice of everyone who ever told the tale. — William Brooke

All cabaret performances tell a story. This is one of the primary differences between cabaret and jazz performances, which are usually just thirteen songs strung together in logical music-making order. If there is talking by a performer in a jazz performance, it is done to introduce the next piece of music or the musicians in the band, whereas “the story” is a central part of cabaret.

Why does cabaret include story as one of the key ingredients in its art? Because story is a universal mirror that shows us the “truth” about ourselves – who and why we are. When we look into this mirror, we see daily routine and mundane circumstances transformed into something profound. Story takes the ordinary and binds it into all of human existence, revealing the significance of the trivial (Collins and Cooper, 2005).

Stories also provide an instrument for people to measure themselves, the world and the situations they encounter. Whereas a lecture enables a person to acquire a facility with abstractions, a story has the capacity to work its way into his thinking life, reveries or idle thoughts, and even moods and dreams. This provides an immediacy that persuasively connects with human experience and allows for its own kind of moral instruction (Coles, 1989).

Many great spiritual teachers have used stories that were deliberately created as vehicles for the transmission of wisdom. These narratives often end up having a wide circulation outside of any instructional function (Shah, 1971). One has only to think of Jesus and his parables, the tales of the Hasidim and the Sufis, the stories of the Brothers' Grimm, Zen teaching stories, and other myths, fairy tales, fables and jokes to realize that stories are among the most valuable of treasures in the human heritage (Umlauf, 1984). It is no wonder then that the art of cabaret, with its intent to lead its audience to a greater spiritual, social, intellectual, and emotional understanding, has utilized the art of storytelling to accomplish its purpose.

- **“Le Chanson”**

The poet, the artist, and the musician, continues the quiet work of the centuries, building bridges of experience between people, reminding man of the universality of his feelings and desires and despairs. — John F. Kennedy

In the beginning of human creation no language such as we have now existed, but only music. Man first expressed his thoughts and feelings by low and high, short and prolonged sounds. Man conveyed his sincerity, insincerity, disinclination, pleasure or displeasure by the variety of his musical expressions. It can be said, then, that all language is derived from music (Wormhoudt, 2001).

For virtually all of us, music has great power, whether or not we seek it out or think of ourselves as particularly musical. This propensity to music, what Oliver Sacks calls “musicophilia,” shows itself in infancy and is manifest and significant in every culture. It may be developed or shaped by the cultures in which we live, by the circumstances of life, or by the particular gifts or weaknesses we have as individuals – but it lies so deep in human nature that one is tempted to think of it as innate (Sacks, 2008).

The physical effect of music, especially when it is sung, has a great influence on us because its vibrations permeate through our whole being. These vibrations arouse us to higher passions, or calm us by bringing us peace (Werner, 1996). Song, then, gives cabaret a magical tool with which it can inspire the life of another person to his/her best advantage while establishing truth of emotion and experience in its realm.

- **The Voice**

“It don’t mean a thing / If you ain’t got that swing.”— Duke Ellington

Man is not a body containing a mind, but a mind expressing through the body. Thus, the voice is not merely a mechanism of the body producing a tone; it is tonal image projecting itself through physical channels into audibility. If the tonal image is properly motivated, the expression yielded by the singer—the voice—will be full of meaning and purpose. As the audience listens to the music coming through the singer, they, too, become inspired.

The well-known contemporary pianist Keith Jarrett says it is the individual voice, present in itself, that needs to be heard. This individual voice is one of the pillars of cabaret. Sharon McNight, an award winning cabaret performer, says “Cabaret is being yourself on purpose. It is a strict discipline that leads the audience on a journey enabling them to laugh and cry. At the same time, there is no character for the performer to hide behind. It is the compelling power of the performer’s voice and being that entices one to go on the ride the song takes them on.”

The true master of the voice is not just master of technique or language, but of himself. He can sit serenely in the center of that space while performing his actions to perfection. This is a state of selflessness and absolute concentration, called Samadhi by the Hindus and Buddhists. Toots Thielemans, one of the great musicians of our time, referred to it as “ground level zero.” Spiraling to deeper levels of consciousness, the singer takes the listener beneath the layers of illusion, peeling him like an onion, in order that he might gain a greater sense of wholeness (Werner, 1996).

### • Humor

Humor is a great thing, the saving thing after all. The minute it crops up, all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations, and resentments flit away, and a sunny spirit takes their place. — Mark Twain

The term “humor” is an umbrella for all funny phenomena and includes the capacities to perceive, interpret, enjoy, create, and relay incongruous communication. Not all cabaret performers use humor, but those who do are among the most highly esteemed.

Humor involves surprise that creates good feelings, is unpredictable and fun. It gives rise to non-linear thought that stimulates creative possibilities not readily apparent to the rational mind. Humor is associated with a variety of desirable correlates and consequences, including encouraging good moods and buffering the effects of life’s stress and daily hassles. The performer who uses humor allows the audience member to construe threatening situations in a more benign way. The openness of humor enables the audience to find creative solutions to puzzling problems (Muller, 2011).

A person with a humorous attitude generally understands the insufficiencies and shortcomings of life, but also tolerates and ultimately forgives them. In this sense, humor is a serious trait that is based on the wisdom that nothing earthly and human is perfect. This is at the heart of what makes humor contemplative, pensive, and profound and why its use as a primary tool in the art of cabaret makes so much sense (Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

### The Contribution of the Virtues to a Life Well-Lived

“After a detour through the hedonism of the 1960’s, the narcissism of the 70’s, the materialism of the 80’s and the apathy of the 90’s, most everyone today seems to believe that character is important after all.” (Peterson, 2004). For example, according to a 1999 survey by Public Agenda, adults in the US cited “not learning values” as the most important problem facing today’s youth, over and above issues such as drug and alcohol use.

However, as philosophical practitioners well know, values, virtues, and character development were not born in the 1990’s. Their contribution to a life well lived was understood and discussed starting at the dawn of Western civilization. The very first Greek philosophers asked, “What is the good of a person?” Beginning with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and continuing with Augustine, Aquinas and others, each enumerated various virtues that contribute to making a person good.

Philosophy changed with the growing influence of Christianity, which saw God as the giver of laws that would make someone a good person. Righteous conduct no longer stemmed from inner virtues, but rather from obedience to the commandments of God. After Nietzsche declared God dead, ethical egoism, utilitarianism, and social contract theory, often dubbed as “moral law,” developed secular equivalents to

God's law. Though the forms have changed, the similarities among the lists of virtues remain. It is our strength of character, developed over time through our striving to lead an ethical life that makes the good life possible.

In the twenty first century, the call to heed the importance of living an ethical life is heard from positive psychologists as well as philosophical practitioners. The field of positive psychology, founded in the 1990s by Dr. Martin Seligman, recognizes that character strengths are the bedrock of the human condition and that strength-congruent activity represents an important route to the good life. This recognition was the catalyst for a new science of character that addresses the question of what results in mental and emotional health and a sense of satisfaction.

Wisdom, courage, humanity, temperance, justice, and transcendence are the virtues included in the positive psychologists' list, which they derived from an extensive study of the major world religions, philosophy and psychology, utilizing historical and cross cultural perspectives to find the virtues that were common to all. Positive psychologists don't want to sound like bad evangelists going on and on about virtue but convincing no one that it is worth pursuing. For this reason, they downplay prescriptions for a good life, emphasizing instead the why and how of good character. Through the use of empirical research, they are studying the properties of settings in which strengths and virtues can thrive.

The systematic historical study and contemporary usage of the virtues in relationship to the good life by positive psychologists led me to choose their list to be the headlines and themes for my cabaret performances. Their list brings rich psychological content and strategies of measurement, and hence explanatory power perhaps out of the realm and reach of philosophy alone. After all, it is individuals and their traits that need to be accorded a central role in the understanding of the good life, just as it is individual people who lead these lives. Positive psychologists know the hazards of a person-less environment, evidenced most acutely in the post-modern world, and they do not want to repeat the mistake (Peterson, 2004).

### **Is Man Really Evolving?**

We are increasingly aware of our precarious, unbalanced condition; of our persistent and ever-increasing production of power, yet inadequacy of purpose; of our triumphantly efficient technical education, contrasted with our largely ineffective, irrelevant education for values, meaning, training of the will, the lifting of the heart, and the illumination of the mind. The question thus arises whether man, who has both beneficially and catastrophically asserted his power over his environment, can change his own nature for the betterment of himself and the world.

An affirmative answer to this question came from the field of biology, which provides evidence for regarding history as significant growth (Simpson, 1950). With man, a new form of purposeful evolution arose that largely overrode the old. Found only in man, social heredity arises from the ascent and blending of ideas. Hence, man purposefully evolves because of his capacity to choose and to give all manner of answers to outer challenges. These answers spring from his ability to recognize that a situation has altered and that thus a new here-and-now is the challenge.

In addition to biology, there are numerous other places where man's purposeful evolution is recognized and described. Since man is evolving, the question arises as what kind of education this "new man" needs. Many agree that this education centers on what character is and on its importance. Later I will describe how the cabaret shows under discussion as philosophical practice meet the need to develop character in our evolving species.

**If Properly Educated, Mankind Can Choose How We Evolve:  
The Contribution of Education to the Life Well-Lived**

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,  
 A remote important region in all who talk;  
 Though we could fool each other, we should consider—  
 Lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.  
 For it is important that awake people be awake,  
 Or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;  
 The signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—  
 Should be clear; the darkness around us is deep.  
 —William Stafford

Modern men and women are perhaps the first civilization that can see the foundation from which our cultural development has arisen. As a result, in growing numbers, individuals have felt not only compelled but free to work out for themselves their relationship to the ultimate conditions of human existence, drawing on a far wider range of resources to do so. The post-modern collapse of meaning has thus been countered by an emerging awareness of the individual's responsibility for himself and his capacity for creative innovation and self-transformation in his existential and spiritual response to life. This awareness permits us to have a more authentic experience. Coupled with this new awareness is our increased longevity, which gives us the time, experience, and consciousness to reflect upon and to develop our character—the particular marks of identity that make one person different from another. Those ultimately make us timeless and deathless (Schachter-Shalomi, 1995).

The growth of individual choice and initiative requires substantial, suitable education in a process that can alter conduct, character and, ultimately, consciousness, and that intentionally forwards our evolution. This education must promote balanced progress and an enlarging vision—not denying, but affirming, never arresting development, but rather releasing it to deduce ever more significant ways of feeling, thinking, and acting. This education of character will not be inculcated pedantically by precepts and maintained by willpower and coercion. Rather, it requires guidance of individuals through a transformation that will lead them into an aesthetic style and set of lasting traits expressed in individualized tastes and behavior

When education serves transformation, it moves us beyond the mold of categories, the current limits of social structure, the pull of cultural condition, the box of self definition. In this process of going beyond, we ride the crest of the wave of creation, a wave that constantly collapses and rises into new forms. We thus have the potential to exist in such a way as to not only comprehend the facts of our lives, but also to transcend them (Hart, 2001).

**Necessary Qualities of this Education**

• **The Importance of Myth**

In Greek, mythos means utterance, story or tale. Something someone says, turned into a story, developed over several generations, is what gives myths their characteristic density and complexity, their imaginative depth, and their universal appeal. At the same time, they tend to have a limited range of themes which are made to perform multiple functions.

Myth-making societies use tales to comment on every aspect of life. They cram into myths reflections of a variety of interests and pre-occupations. Myths are not uniform, logical and internally consistent; they are multiform, imaginative, and loose in their details. Moreover, their emphasis can change from one year or one generation to the next.

Myths act out human affairs, dramatizing universal struggles that disorder our character. The patterns of myth, with their personified posers often trying to be something they are not, present archetypal styles of existence which none can escape and of which none can be cured. As bearers of important messages about life in general and life within society in particular, myths illustrate a way through that demonstrates instead of improvement, necessity; instead of health, soul; instead of experiment and statistic, philosophy; and instead of information, insight and vision. Those qualities of myth are what have made them and will continue to make them useful tools for enabling character development (Kirk, 1974).

#### • **The Importance of Archetype**

The theory of archetypes, though associated with Carl Jung, is by no means his invention. Some Greek philosophers like Cicero and Pliny, as well as thinkers of the medieval church, represented by Augustine, attributed this consistency in the midst of alteration to the idea of form. Kant also thought the human experience was permeated by a priori structures, as, in similar ways, did Nietzsche and Freud.

Jung studied the tradition of the “subjective known forms” (Sanskrit: antarjneya-rupa) while living under and working with the impact of powerful and extensive experiences of the human psyche. This enabled him to posit universal archetypes, with all their power and rich complexity, as the fundamental determining structures of human experience.

Breaking through distorted personal images to the undistorted, direct experience and assimilation of archetypal forms is the process known to Hindu and Buddhist philosophy as viveka, discrimination between what is eternal and what is non-eternal; it is the work of the modern, transcending man (Campbell, 2008). Twenty-first century education, then, would include helping to mediate the modern mind’s access to archetypal forces and realities thereby connecting the individual self with the world and dissolving his dualistic world view.

#### • **The Importance of Emotions**

The philosophers of Greece and Rome were interested in the emotional experience of humans. For many of them, emotional responses were essentially activities of the mind’s judging faculties for which we are held accountable. Some, like Cicero, believed, along with the Stoics, that real moral and intellectual seriousness requires us to do away with them (Graver, 2002). For later philosophers like Rene Descartes, emotions were seen as part of our primitive animal nature, associated with disorganization and loss of control and therefore not to be trusted.

The roots of a more comprehensive understanding of the importance of emotions were found in biology. Charles Darwin wrote about the importance of emotional expression for survival and adaptation. Scientists who study emotion today continue to suggest that it is a complex, exquisitely efficient information system designed to organize behavior rapidly in the interests of survival. Without emotion to guide us, we can’t make even the most elementary of decisions—we’re bereft of preferences and have nothing to move us toward one option rather than another.

The idea that emotion isn't the poor cousin to reason but a higher order of intelligence has been around for decades, but now the scientific evidence is clear. As a result of this change of perspective and our new understanding of the nature of emotions, education of character to change conduct and consciousness can use our powerful, bone-deep responses to transform our lives. Since all aspects of character have an emotional content, if we know the structure and function of emotion, as well as how it is shaped in human relationships, we can use its power to create lasting change in a deliberate, effective manner (Johnson, S., 2012).

#### • **The Contribution of Imagination**

Imagination is the ability to form a mental image of something that is not perceived through the senses. With imagination, the mind builds mental scenes and creates objects or events that do not immediately exist, are not present or have happened in the past. It is a creative power, necessary for inventing an instrument, designing a dress, painting a picture, writing a book and much more (Lehrer, 2012).

More than a mere faculty, imagination is one of the great archetypal principles. Kant said that although we are hardly ever conscious of it, imagery and imagination definitively form our thinking about elemental nature. Jung also thought that imagination is vital to our understanding. He noted that even physics, the strictest of all applied sciences, depends to an astonishing degree upon imagination, even though it was possible to demonstrate the logical procedures that could have led one to the same result (Jung, 1964). Witness how yesterday's science fiction is today's science.

If the character of a person is a complexity of images, then in order to know that character one must be able to assimilate those images through the process of imagination. Imagination makes it possible to experience a whole world, including the world of character. The critical analytic method of education of character will benefit from being supplemented by the exercise of imagination, enabling the individual to grow further by imagination of an ideal.

Man, therefore, does grow in consciousness, learn from experience, and make sense of an increasing area of awareness. He can train himself, and he has done so with increasing understanding. In order to accomplish this. However, there must be producers of comprehension who will be the feeders of understanding and who value a true and living morality. They would bring the ruling mores up to date and add new and fuller knowledge as to how we could behave more effectively (Heard, 1963).

#### **Contribution of the Cabaret Shows on the Virtues to Philosophical Practice**

It seems, as one becomes older,  
That the past has another pattern and ceases to be a mere sequence,  
We had the experience but missed the meaning,  
And approach to meaning restores the experience  
In a different form, beyond any meaning.

—T.S.Eliot, *Four Quartets (Dry Salvages)*

Throughout history and across cultures, art has been used as the vehicle for the expression or communication of emotions and ideas, a means for exploring and appreciating formal elements for their own sake and as mimesis or representation. For Plato and Aristotle, all objects of art should conform as closely as possible to their divine model. They thought the more remote man became from his divine origin, the more these forms became corrupted by the pursuit of novelty and complication (Onians, 1979).



Goethe defined art according to his ideal of a style founded on the basic fundamentals of insight and the innermost character of things, while Leo Tolstoy identified art as a use of indirect means to communicate from one person to another. For John Dewey, art and the aesthetic in experience is what ultimately constitutes the kernel of genuine philosophy. The essence of art is human experience brought to consummation and fulfillment through a dynamic, self-forming interaction between man and reality (Hofstadter, 1964). For Heidegger, art is the creative preservation of truth in the work. He defined truth as an unconcealment [sic], the revelation of the being of what is (Heidegger, 1975).

Similar ideas are found in Eastern philosophies of art. For example, according to Buddhist philosophy, a work of art is meant to bring out the goodness and dignity of a situation. True works of art can even create an enlightened society, which, for Buddhists, is the purpose of art altogether (Trungpa, 2008). Indian wisdom has always extolled art as a key to the salvation of ultimate release sought by all good Hindus. Throughout time and cultures, then, the purpose of true art, or what G.I. Gurdjieff calls “conscious art,” remains pretty much the same—to creatively preserve the truth.

The six cabaret shows on the virtues are conscious works of art. They each present an archetypal form of one of the virtues mentioned above, using story, humor, song, and the power of the individual performer, in order to create a more enlightened audience. Three of the six shows have been written and performed. “Accentuate the Positive” highlights the character strength of optimism, a subset of the virtue of transcendence. “You’ve Got to Have Heart concerns itself with the character strength of love, a subset of the virtue humanity, and “Sage-ing, not Age-ing,” is a show on the virtue of wisdom. Using these twenty-first century tools for education for conduct, character, and consciousness, myth, archetype, emotion, imagination, and humor, each performance throws a new and extraordinary light on the virtues and their nature, opening up whole new worlds to the audience.

### **The Workshops Designed to Accompany Each Performance**

“Nothing interests us which is stark or bounded, but only what streams with life.”  
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Two types of work will be most useful in supporting a balanced progress towards changing character, conditioning, and consciousness (Heard, 1963). The first consists of new creations which bring the presiding mores up to date. These artistic endeavors would add new and fuller knowledge as to how we could behave more effectively. The cabaret shows under discussion fall into this category. The second type of work especially needed in this époque of unique potentialities is one which would help individuals construct a wider range and frame of reference from which to deduce an ever more significant way of feeling, thinking and acting. The workshops designed to accompany each cabaret performance are devised to do just that.

The instruction given in the workshops is not by rule and precept. Instead, the individuals attending them are given the opportunity to exercise their choice and initiative while participating in specific, conscious self-education of character development. All workshops begin with an informal philosophical discussion of the virtue under consideration using the Socratic Dialogue (Marinoff, 1999). Collage, mask-making, and sand play, creative projects engaged in during the course of the workshop, enable participants to relate to the virtues in an archetypal, imaginative and creative way. Movies illustrating lives of engagement and meaning are shown and discussed (Niemiec, 2008). Other philosophical exercises are given such as David Hume’s *Techniques for Self-Improvement* (Gould, 2011). Although full engagement in the pursuit of character development does not guarantee a good life, the strategies used within them go a long way in helping each participant lay out their own unique pattern of creative, conscious liberty.

## Summary

Cabaret, a unique artistic experience that utilizes song, an intimate setting, and the performer to convey a personal story of universal significance, is a well-suited tool with which to teach character development in the twenty-first century. The particular cabaret performances under discussion construct a broader and deeper comprehension of the virtues through the use of myth, archetype, emotion, humor and imagination. The workshops that accompany each show invite a deeper, more personal relationship to the virtues.

Man is a migrant of eternity. The culture that does not provide for the rhythms of infinitude will be wrecked by the force which, had it been expressed, should have given replenishment. These cabaret shows offer a path to the infinite and timeless forms of the virtues, giving people a bridge to the replenishment they need.

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