



Luke Macfarlane appears as Sam Bendrix
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weekend

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A CODED SWAN SONG

BY DANA GAVIN | WEEKEND@THEHUDSONVALLEYNEWS.COM

Last year, Poughkeepsie native Keith Bunin brought his play, “Vera Laughed,” to Powerhouse – the work, which starred Tony and Drama Desk nominee Maureen Anderman as Vera and Jeffrey DeMunn as her husband, Ivan Bunin (a distant relative of the playwright). It was a moving piece, a domestic drama of relationships that took place in a house in France against the backdrop of World War II.

This year, Bunin (who has also written for the HBO series “In Treatment,”) brings a very different play, “Sam Bendrix at the Bon Soir,” which kicks off the “Inside Look” series of workshops. Set in a smoky Greenwich Village nightclub in 1958, a young singer steps on stage for his last performance prior to leaving New York City forever. This work seems to be, in many ways, the aesthetic and emotional opposite of “Vera Laughed,” and so I asked Bunin to discuss his approach to “Bendrix” and the resulting work.

Bunin said he began working on “Bendrix” “in earnest, a little over a year ago. I got the idea for it seriously in fall of 2008.” A number of ideas inspired him, from the music of the time period (late ’50s cabaret music), “intimate supper clubs, kind of a rarified thing: the jazz movement in downtown Greenwich Village. It was a fascinating time, ten years after the war – New York was a vibrant and changing place,” said Bunin. “America was very conservative.”

The Bon Soir, where the character Sam Bendrix performs, is based on a real club that was located in Manhattan. “It wasn’t expensive to go out there,” said Bunin. “You could have a drink and be social.”

Bendrix is a bartender and aspiring singer, and the play’s framework is that of a real-time cabaret act. “It’s him and a three-piece band, playing music of the era – all real stuff that I found. The audiences ‘plays’ the role of the audience in 1958.”

The catch is that Bendrix is in a particularly revealing mood as he performs his

“Sam Bendrix at the Bon Soir”
 Written by Keith Bunin
 Directed by Mark Rucker
 Musical direction by Debra Barsha
 July 1-3
 8 p.m. | Thursday-Friday
 2 & 8 p.m. | Saturday
 Tickets: \$20
 Susan Stein Shiva Theater
 Vassar College, 124 Raymond Ave.,
 Poughkeepsie.
 845-437-7235 or 845-437-5599



Writer Keith Bunin. © Vassar College / Kerry Long

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 final concert: “He’s telling more than he intended too.”

This real-time format was appealing, said Bunin. “‘In Treatment’ is in real time, and it’s a really fun thing to do, but it’s not for every project. The lights go up, the lights go down: It’s about 90 minutes. It’s a form I’ve never really used before (in previous plays).”

If “Vera Laughed” was a look at the interior and unguarded moments of several people sharing a house, “Sam Bendrix at the Bon Soir” is an attempt to peel away the tough layers of a particularly guarded public performance. “One thing I learned,” said Bunin, “about gay life in New York (in the 1950s) was that it was a very coded time. People lived lives that were sort of opaque *and* transparent, depending on the various layers of themselves.”

Bunin described the role of music in “Bendrix” in a similar way to Tracy Thorne’s description of music in “We Are There.”

“It’s a play with songs,” he said. “It’s not really a musical in a connective sense, with songs that move the plot forward. This is a singer doing an act for us.”

That singer will be played by Luke Macfarlane from ABC’s “Brothers and Sisters.” Bunin said that he worked very closely with Macfarlane to develop the show: “I know that Luke plays the cello, so I could tailor it to the performer. Because of the nature of things, you (usually) don’t know who will to the part. It was a fun thing to go in the opposite direction, knowing what special skills he has. It was really fun.”