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The Long and Short of the Skylight

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Imagine a friendly, yet sophisticated party, where the witty host sits at the piano while the charming, talented hostess and talented guests take turns singing. Between tunes, banter, jokes and anecdotes about life in the theater ensue.

Paula and Colin Cabot's *The Long and Short of It*, the revue that debuts New Year's Eve at the Skylight Opera Theatre's intimate Studio Theatre, will be something like that party. The topic will be the Skylight; both Cabots have long histories with the company.

Colin, 59, came to the Skylight in 1974, as founder Clair Richardson's assistant. He served as managing director from 1977 to 1989. Cabot remained in Milwaukee until 1993 and was the key figure in moving the company to its present Third Ward facility. His family gave the lead gift for the Third Ward complex; the main stage is called the Cabot Theatre.

He met Paula, 54, then Paula Dewey, in 1982. She came to town to perform in a Skylight production of Gershwin's "Oh Kay!" Many roles with the company followed. The Cabots moved to rural New Hampshire in 1997, where they own and operate the **Sanborn Mills** historic farm.



Colin Cabot at the piano, with the late Montgomery Davis, in 1992.

They'll have plenty of anecdotes to share, and even more to talk about because of the **big controversy** that blew up around the company in July, when financial difficulties led to the firing of artistic director Bill Theisen. The Cabots canceled their show in protest, and Colin returned to Milwaukee to try to help straighten out the mess. He even took over as artistic director for a while. Theisen has since been reinstated not only as artistic director, but of the resurrected *Long and Short of It*.



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Paula Cabot, as Polly Peachum in "The Threepenny Opera" in 1989.

Cabot was heavily involved in fund-raising efforts to save the company — until recently.

"I hear it's going well," he said. "The great thing about that right now is that they're doing it without me. They're letting me rehearse."

It hasn't been merely rehearsing for Colin, Paula and Bill. They've been creating the show, too. The Cabots thought they had it ready to go, after writing a whole script during a sea voyage to New Zealand, where Cabot's parents spend their winters. But they threw out that script on second viewing.

"We restarted in October," Paula said.

"We wanted to do all this weird stuff that nobody ever heard," Colin said. "Then Bill reminded us that this is the 50th anniversary of the Skylight. Bill is gentle and kind and won't let us go off the deep end."

They've ended up with an evening of medleys interspersed with anecdotes.

"A lot of people will remember the shows we're talking about," Cabot said. "And people who are new to the Skylight will get a little of what it was like and why we loved it so."

The Cabots worked for years at the company's old Jefferson Street Theatre, a converted industrial space with a ridiculously wide and shallow stage and very limited facilities.

"As much as we love the new theater," Paula said, "there was something about that old tire-recapping garage. The problems with it had to be solved, and that led to a lot of creative ferment."

The old theater will a *Long and Short* topic, along with bygone shows and the company's great characters. First among them is Clair Richardson. He often declared that this or that would happen on his stage only over "my dead body." When he died, his ashes were placed in an urn beneath the stage, so everything now literally happens over Richardson's dead body. His urn, by the way, will be moved to the Studio Theatre for the run of *The Long and Short of It*.

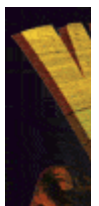
Some of the Cabots' guest artists, such as Norman Moses, Ray Jivoff and Kay Stiefel, have worked straight through the years at the Skylight and other companies. Others, such as Kathy Magestro, who has sung in opera houses in Germany for decades, haven't been seen in these parts for years. The Sharks Girls, from a 1988 *West Side Story*, have reassembled for *Long and Short*.

"We invite such unfavorable comparisons with our former selves," Colin noted, about revisiting old material after decades. "The Sharks Girls had a party and watched at an archival video of themselves and really liked it. And here they are doing it again. It's charming."

Colin has taken up the piano with renewed vigor since moving to New Hampshire, but Paula pretty much retired from the stage and from singing.

"I was absolutely terrified about doing this show," she said. "I was used to singing in the bathroom at the farmhouse. But I've been working hard to get my voice into shape. If I can just balance terror with excitement, I'll be OK."

"I'm still working through the hard work of accompanying," Colin said. "We didn't practice together until we both got to Milwaukee. The humility that comes from the knowledge that you don't know what you're doing is still there."



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Dewey will sing a medley of every song she sang in every show she did at the Skylight. Cabot will take a moment for a Poulenc piano solo. They've dug up some rarer gems by Stephen Sondheim and Harold Arlen.

But the show isn't just about the music. It's about being in a room with two charming people with stories to tell. *The Long and Short of It* not just theater; it's a party with theatre people.

The Long and Short of It will run in the Studio Theatre of the Skylight's Broadway Theatre Center, 158 N. Broadway, through Jan. 10. The New Year's Eve Gala is sold out. Tickets for other performances are \$35.50. Visit www.skylightopera.com or call the BTC box office, 414-291-7800.

Anticipated guests artists, who will show up at various points through the run, include Ray Jivoff, Kathryn Magestro, Kurt Ollmann, Pam Kriger, Elaine Parsons-Herro, Bill Theisen, Ellie Quint, Molly Rhode, Chase Stoeger, Jack Forbes Wilson and Kay Stiefel.



Paula Cabot

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