

BACK STAGE • October 8, 2004

Bistro Bits

BY JOHN HOGLUND

Balancing Act

One of the perks of cabaret is its ability to redefine itself in unconventional ways. Such was the case with **Wambui Bahati** in her one- woman cabaret-theatre foray. “Balancing Act: A One-Woman Musical.” at Don’t Tell Mama. With brilliant musical director **Curvie McMurray** at the piano, Bahati (whose given name is John-Ann Washington) presented a tour de force that galvanized the room.

With a promising theatrical career that got sidetracked as a result of undiagnosed bipolar disorder, resulting in a kinetic lifestyle that spun out of control for years, Bahati faced emotional abuse, homelessness, the loss of custody of her two children, and several institutionalizations before she bounced back. And it’s all incorporated into this bruising, schizophrenic cabaret-theatre piece that is both harsh and poignant.

Bahati handles it all with a flair and over-the-top dramatics that suit her powerhouse style. Her riveting performance is powerful. As an actress and singer. Bahati reached as many Olympian highs and lows in her show as she did in her life. At times it is shocking in its intensity. Other times it is funny. Throughout, it is frantically paced as she emotes the manic side of her persona. Many of the vignettes are ultimately punctuated with a song. The tunes are good and hit the mark, be they disco, rock ballad, or blues in the night. A gospel rafter-raiser, “I Forgot,” closes the show on an optimistic note as she ultimately triumphs. Asking herself “Why me?,” she sums it up by saying, “The past does not equal the future.” In the case of Wambui Bahati, sharing such personal psychological and emotional mazes in a cabaret setting and making it work so well puts the lady in a class by herself.