

REVIEW: Susan Werner illuminates CSPS stage

Diana Nollen/SourceMedia Group News

Susan Werner performs at the CSPA reopening gala in Cedar Rapids on Friday evening, Aug. 26, 2011. The Manchester native will return for another concert Sunday, Aug. 28, 2011. (Stephen Mally/Freelance)

By Diana Nollen/ SourceMedia Group

CEDAR RAPIDS — Susan Werner is to music what the sun is to Earth: a source of endless energy needed to sustain life and push it in new directions.

That makes her the perfect person to reopen CSPA, once home to the Czech-Slovak Protective Society, secret lodges on the third floor and fire horses in the basement, but now an endless resource for sustaining and growing artists on local and world stages.

“It’s fantastic, world-class,” Werner said of the 120-year-old building’s \$7 million renovation, unveiled for 200 people attending Friday night’s gala (8/26/2011) where tuxedos and blue jeans were equally welcome and appropriate.

“These guys are all-in. They’re not careful, they’re not cautious, they do it,” Werner said afterward of F. John Herbert and Mel Andringa, co-founders of Legion Arts. Their forward-moving organization took up residence in the former Czech social hall 20 years ago and now owns and operates a facility that includes a new black-box theater; video room; first- and second-floor art galleries; three retail spaces; an arts incubator to help launch local artists and arts organizations; public meeting rooms; a catering kitchen; expanded box office and concessions areas; as well as the familiar 200-seat auditorium that has showcased singers, dancers and performance artists from around the globe.

“They’re putting CSPA, Cedar Rapids and Eastern Iowa on the map,” Werner said.

So is she.

The 40-something Manchester native, now based in Chicago, has garnered resounding praise from critics around the country. Let me add mine to the list, along with the cheers, whistles,



thunderous applause and two standing ovations from the audience she held spellbound for 90 minutes Friday night. Bonus: she's performing at CSPS again at 7 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 28, 2011. Tickets are \$21 at the door.

It's not enough to say she's a brilliant, spectacular performer. She is pure genius in capturing the human experience and setting it to music. She's also a chameleon, slipping seamlessly between cabaret, folk, gospel, classical and the blues. She's recorded albums in all those stylings, and included marvelous glimpses of each in Friday's concert.

She sucks you into her world not only with her gorgeous, crystalline tones, but also with her easy banter that's a little bit sassy, laced with a dash of cynicism and wry humor, wrapped around deep insight. Her loveliest quality, however, is how she infuses her music with an immense affection for her Iowa roots.

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That homegrown love paints vivid pictures of farm life through her winsome, beautiful "Barbed Wire Boys" and an instantly-evocative ode to her mother's strawberry-rhubarb criss-cross pies. You can just smell those aromatic pies as she sings her memories, trailing off with yummy-sound humming.

Her Iowa love also turns hilarious on a song she's just finished about how the face of a man is written in the river, where the Mississippi carves out the east side of Iowa — "the greenest corner of God's green earth." Laughter erupted as she injected that "winter in Iowa is why God made Phoenix," and ended with Neil Armstrong telling Houston he could see the Great Wall of China and the Mississippi River from the moon — and Dubuque.

Her pensive, deeply lush side rings through Marvin Gaye's "Mercy Mercy Me" environmental lament that Werner slowed down, remade and revived with a gorgeous classical piano accompaniment. That same beauty is captured in her own composition, "May I Suggest (this is the best part of your life)."

She brought down the house, however, with her cheeky "Movie of My Life," where she hopes everyone will see how fabulous she is, with all the braggadocio spiraling downward to the admittance she has a "very, very, very little life." Yeah, right. No one's buying that Susan, even when you split our sides by singing way off-key in the middle.

Just when you thought the concert couldn't get any better, she channeled Edith Piaf for the gloriously haunting bohemian rhapsody, "La Vie en Rose," in perfect French. You entered our hearts in such a happy way, Susan Werner.

ARTS EXTRA

What: Susan Werner in concert **When:** 7 p.m. Sunday, Aug 28, 2011 **Where:** CSPS, 1103 Third St. SE, Cedar Rapids **Tickets:** \$21 at the door; \$17 in advance at <http://legionarts.org/events/susan-werner> **Artist's website:** www.susanwerner.com