

Personalities

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR ...

Alan Cumming

BY ERIN CARLSON

Weeks before bringing his hit cabaret show to Schultz Cultural Arts Hall in Palo Alto this month, Alan Cumming was feeling a bit nervous. The Tony-winning Scottish actor first performed Alan Cumming Sings Sappy Songs four years ago at New York City's Café Carlyle, earning critical raves in his adopted hometown. Afterward, he took Sappy Songs to such cities as Las Vegas, where PBS recorded a masterful performance that aired in November 2016. In the special, Cumming combined emotion and edge to tell his life story through music from Annie Lennox and Keane to Billy Joel and Miley Cyrus, among other artists. Lately, the multitasker — who shifts from stage to screen and back with astonishing ease — has focused on his new act, *Legal Immigrant*, a timely defense of the importance of immigrants in society. “Once in a while someone says, ‘Oh, we never got Sappy Songs. Can we have it?’ And so I pull it out of the bag,” he says. “But this is the longest that [the band and I] won’t have ever done it, so it’s kind of scary.” At the same time, he affirms, “We’ll be great.”

While Cumming, 54, prepares to resurrect Sappy Songs following a hiatus, there’s no question that once he hits the stage on April 14, he’ll own it like no other.

1 You’re a diehard New Yorker. New Yorkers like to gripe about California. What do you like about our state?

New Yorkers don’t really bitch about California. They bitch about L.A. more, and I think it’s partly because L.A. is a work [town]. For me, I bitch about L.A. because it’s a work town. ... People [in California] have a very great sense of using the outdoors, and health, and recreation. It’s standing up for our climate, and the values that we all used to think were the values of this country. I mean, I’m full of admiration for California right now. But L.A., still, is a little bit of a bugbear in my liking — just in terms that spending time there means, in a way, letting go of the more rounded way of life that I would like.

2 What inspired your cabaret act?

In my dressing room [at the 2014 revival of *Cabaret*], I started this thing called Club Cumming. I got a bar. A booze sponsor gave me all this booze. ... And I would have drinks and play music. ... I grew to love a lot of the songs [I heard backstage that year], and put them into [*Sappy Songs*]. I thought, “Why do these songs keep coming back to me? I don’t really like these songs.” And I realized they’re either by artists who I sort of am slightly snobby about, or there were songs, pop songs, that were over-produced, and you couldn’t really hear [the music itself]. I think, “Why should I stand up and sing songs? I don’t have that great a voice, but I know I can be authentic.”

3 Also this spring, you’ll perform *Legal Immigrant* in Southern California. What inspired you to turn the subject of immigration into cabaret?

About a year ago now, I read that the [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services] website removed the phrase “nation of immigrants” from its website, and that shocked me. I mean it just really shocked me that this historical revision was happening. ... I called it *Legal Immigrant* because it doesn’t really matter what’s in front of the word “immigrant” anymore. Just the word itself is, like, alarm bells and negativity. When you grow negative about immigration, you’re really being negative about America — so anti-immigration really equals anti-American.

4 You were heckled onstage by some Trump supporters in Palm Beach. On the flip side, any unexpectedly positive experiences performing the show?

I was in Arizona last December, and I was like, “Oh God, what’s this going to be like?” We were in Tucson. It was absolutely great. It was an amazing audience, actually. It’s almost like the nearer you get [to the U.S.-Mexico border], people are going, “We don’t want a wall.” ... There was a man in the front row wearing an AOC T-shirt. And I thought, “Oh, this is going to be fine.” So, I sent [*Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*] a little video from the tour bus afterward, just saying that she should know she’s loved everywhere. And this was even before she was a congresswoman.

5 Palo Alto is Silicon Valley territory. What kind of advice do you have for artsy kids whose parents are pushing them to pursue careers in, say, venture capital?

I mean, the arts have a lot of things to offer in terms of how we [understand] the human mind, and how the human mind works, and how you understand other people. So I think, “Give it a go.” Don’t be one of those people who say, “Oh, I was going to do that. I wish I’d done this. I wish my life would be different.” Because it’s not a pleasant place to be. ... It might not work out. It doesn’t work out for 95 percent of people. But wouldn’t you rather have given it a go and had some fun and learned things and met people?

