

SUNDAY STYLES

## For a Protean Actor, Life Is a Cabaret

Alan Cumming brings his three-year-old touring show 'Not Acting His Age' to town.

By JUAN A. RAMÍREZ

"I hope you don't mind — I'll have a coterie of boys coming in all night," Alan Cumming joked as he sidled into a banquetette at an Upper West Side wine bar recently. A director had messaged him on Instagram, hop-



Alan Cumming in Little Island park off Lower Manhattan, above, and in his show "Alan Cumming Is Not Acting His Age" at Studio 54, left.



Alan Cumming said his show was inspired by his title role in the 2019 play "Daddy."



ing to get Mr. Cumming to act in his short film, and they'd agreed to meet directly after this interview.

Already that day, the 59-year-old Scottish actor had filmed a television appearance in the meatpacking district, posed for two photo sessions and gone for a swim. Later, he was seeing the comedian Alex Edelman's one-man show at the Beacon Theater before driving up to Boston the next day to perform his cabaret, "Alan Cumming Is Not Acting His Age."

The show, which he's been touring since 2021, made its New York premiere this month at Studio 54. Mr. Cumming knows the space well; he reprised his role in the musical "Cabaret" there in 2014, 16 years after winning his first Tony Award for his risqué lead performance. In the show he blends show tunes, anecdotes and Peggy Lee standards, all in the name of exploring and demystifying aging.

"I think what I love about my career is that I sort of bombarded people in the early '90s through the early 2000s with these magical queer figures," he said. "I guess I

Still do. They just got older."

The performance felt like a homecoming — friends like Kristin Chenoweth, Billie Jean King, Michael Kors and Jane Krakowski were in attendance — but Mr. Cumming has long been a city institution, perhaps best cemented with the opening of his namesake East Village speakeasy, Club Cumming,

almost seven years ago.

But for the buzzy-minded, the most conspicuous audience member that night was Peppermint, the drag performer who'd recently competed in the Peacock reality show "The Traitors." The series has become a runaway hit largely thanks to Mr. Cumming, who hosts it with campy archness.

In advance of the cabaret's second New York date, on Monday, Mr. Cumming spoke of the show's origins, his career and Liza Minnelli. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

### What led you to start developing this cabaret?

It was really because of that show I did in 2019, "Daddy," by Jeremy O. Harris. I felt I needed to look older because I was in a play called "Daddy," and I'm the daddy, and I'm clearly not old enough. I was completely old enough. So I grew out this big daddy beard but then had to be naked for a long time in it,

and found the way people reacted to a man of my age being naked so weird. It was all positive, but being objectified at that age got me thinking: What should I look like?

I have a lot of nostalgia, but I think that word gets a hard sell. It's looked at as something negative but, if you learn from and rejoice in it, then it's a good thing. It's like "ambition." People always think of that as being a conniving bitch, but to me it's about wanting something to change for the good.

### You looked like you caught yourself off guard choking up while singing Adele's "When We Were Young." Does the vulnerability of doing a cabaret show surprise you?

I'm not going to collapse, but I'm going to allow myself to get to the emotion I want to have in the song. But I'm aware that I'm performing and want to be that vulnerable to make people [gasp].

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show, "And I have that powder puff to this day." The whole place — I mean, can you imagine the gays gasping, screaming about there being Judy Garland DNA in Liza's apartment?

We got drinks at her hotel after the show, and I asked if she really still had that powder puff. She went, "No, darling, none of that ever happened!" That's show business. Isn't that great?

During the cabaret, you say there's going to be a lot of name-dropping, but it more so feels that you, yourself, are amazed to have some of these people — like Jessica Lange and Sean Connery — in your life.

I say that as a joke because I'm not doing it for effect. Most of my friends aren't famous, but I do come in contact with famous people all the time, as an occupational hazard. I didn't come to America until I was 30. Ima-

gine growing up with all these great cultural touchstones and then suddenly moving to a completely new culture: You still have this outsider's view and a great grounding. And then, of course, when you come into something new, you really find out who you are. I think that's really helped me as a person.

### Do you hold on to that outsidership?

Totally. I feel like that's what my next cabaret, "Uncut," is about: being an outsider and how, ironically, when you're trying to be authentic, that means you're different and weird. It's about, well, being actually uncut, but also unedited and uncensored. And when you haven't been "hacked," by plastic surgery or downstairs, you're intact and the odd one out. Bizarrely, when you actually are this thing we're all trying to be — authentic — you're the other.

I'm an outsider in America, in Scotland, in many ways. I don't really know anyone who does all the different kinds of things I do. I've carved this life for myself that I love, but it's also kind of solitary.

### How does Club Cumming fit into your brand?

I feel it's an extension of my personality, so I'm very conscious of it. We've been talking to [the production company] World of Wonder about developing a docuseries following the different personalities — staff, performers — around the club and how they found their tribe there.

There are so many beautiful things going on there. One of our go-go boys who's there from the start is now a go-go girl. Isn't that lovely? We've built this little community out of something I put into the world, wanting it to feel a certain way, that everyone's taken

and run with.

### Do you feel like "The Traitors" has introduced you to a new audience?

I don't think there are many people who didn't know who I was. I just think they've rejoiced in me a bit, you know? They're as shocked as I am that I'm on a show like that, and they're reveling in what I bring to it.

### Are you reveling in what you bring to it?

I love it. I was hesitant, because I didn't understand it. Then I met with [the producers] and they said they wanted me to be a character, and I understood. I wasn't hesitant because it was left field; I do weird things all the time. I'm used to weird things popping up and grabbing them. But I love "The Traitors" and getting to camp up — the true definition of camp.

### What's your definition of

camp?

Understanding that the audience knows I'm doing something subversive and with a wink. I think I've always done that. Even when I played Eli Gold on "The Good Wife," I felt like people liked that because I was almost commenting on him as I was playing him. When people know you and know your personality — I guess we call it a brand now — people are like, "What's he going to do?"

I think that's reached a peak with "Traitors" because I'm being unusually theatrical for that form of TV. But I think camp is quite complicated, to play a character while having something underneath it. Most people think camp is just throwing a feathered boa around your neck. Americans get camp wrong often. Look at that Met Gala [whose theme in 2019 was camp]. People didn't know what it was.

