

# Life is still a cabaret

### Broadway legend John Kander tells Tim Teeman why, at 85, he's too busy working to see his classic show back in the West End

Later he would become “Kander” of Kander and Ebb, creators of such landmark musicals as *Cabaret*, *Chicago* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, but the die was cast early for John Kander. He composed his first piece of music aged 7, during maths class: “The teacher asked me a question. I couldn’t answer. She asked what I was doing. I said, ‘Writing a Christmas carol’. Eventually they played it at our Christmas assembly.”

Kander, now 85, and speaking in his home near Central Park in New York, laughs. “She called my parents and said, ‘John has just written a Christmas carol and I know you’re Jewish. Is that OK?’ They said it was fine.”

Kander has a new collaborator, after the death of his lyricist partner Fred Ebb at the age of 76 from a heart attack eight years ago. Greg Pierce is the 35-year-old nephew of David Hyde Pierce (Niles from *Frasier*), and the pair are preparing their first full-length musical, *Kid Victory*.

“It sounds odd, collaborating with somebody who’s 50 years younger, but working with Greg is leading me to

write in a different way,” Kander says. This autumn also sees a production of their first piece, *The Landing*, a compendium of three musicals, so Kander will not be visiting London to see Rufus Norris’s production of *Cabaret*, starring Will Young as the MC. “Work is incredibly important to me,” Kander says. “I’m having a very late second childhood. It’s what I like to do.”

As musical-theatre legends go, the winner of three Tonys, two Emmys and two Grammys is affable and modest. His most treasured possessions are posters of every Broadway show that he and Ebb created. “In a funny way Fred and I didn’t stop working together,” he says of the period after Ebb’s death. They were busy on four projects, including the Broadway musical *The Scottsboro Boys*, which opened in 2010. Kander was “stunned” when Ebb died. “We had worked and been together for so long I was totally unprepared for it. I dealt with it but didn’t deal with it.” Kander didn’t think of stopping writing after Ebb’s death. “If you write music, that’s what you do. You can’t turn off your brain. There’s music going on in my head all the time. There’s this river of sound, so unless that inner radio ever turns off I won’t stop. It’s like a drug habit I guess.”

Is it an expensive one, given the huge costs and risks of Broadway shows? “I’ve been reading about the death of Broadway since I was a kid. Right now I’m not particularly in love with the financial structure, but as far as talent goes I think we’re in a much better period than many people think. There’s not a lack of writers, composers, choreographers, painters and artists — there never is. I don’t know where the money goes; certainly not to creative people. Theatre is in trouble and it’s all financial. I know lots of very gifted



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, CHRISTOPHER LANE

people who are unable to show their work. If they do, it’s in tiny places.”

Kander’s workroom has a keyboard, computers and a piano, on which are pictures of loved ones. He grew up in Missouri “with a very warm family life, a lot of laughter”, and began playing the piano at 4. “There was a Mason & Hamlin baby grand in the living room. I found it early. I fell in love with the Metropolitan Opera through live radio broadcasts. My grandmother had studied piano; my father had a wonderful, big baritone voice. He and my brother would sing after supper. My mother was tone-deaf but had rhythm, so I would play marches for her. Someone said of a composer, ‘Everything he ever heard went in one ear and stayed there’; that’s sort of what happened to me.”

As a teenager, “deep down”, Kander wanted to come to New York. “In those days 50 per cent of the hit songs came from Broadway.” He and his brother “went to the theatre every night and every matinee” during spring holidays.

John Kander at his studio in Manhattan. Below: Will Young stars in *Cabaret* at the Savoy Theatre



won an Oscar for her performance in the 1972 film of *Cabaret*. “Fred was her mentor,” Kander says. “She said she came out of his imagination. We just connected; it felt very natural.” What of Minnelli’s rollercoaster life; the drugs and marriages? “There are a lot of things you can recount about Liza, but you won’t be able to come up with a single instance where she hurt anyone else. She’s a really good person.”

Shows such as *Cabaret* and *Spider Woman* showcased complex themes — the ascendancy of Nazism, gay desire — with peppy scores. “It’s much easier to write stories with that kind of richness than ‘boy meets girl’. We weren’t sociologists, we were just in love with theatre,” Kander says. The duo worked in Ebb’s study with a baby grand piano, “making it up as we went along”. Their famous song *New York, New York*, sung by Minnelli, was composed “in under an hour” when Martin Scorsese, director of the 1977 film of the same name, told the songwriters that its star, Robert De Niro, found their original version “too light”. “We were pretty p\*\*\*\*ed off and thought, ‘How dare he?’” smiles Kander. “But De Niro was absolutely right. Now I can’t remember what that original version sounded like.”

Ebb loved the city, Kander his second home near Woodstock. “When we weren’t working we didn’t socialise much. I was in the country as much as possible; Fred was playing poker.” Both gay, Ebb was single while Kander has been with his partner Albert Stephenson, a former dancer and choreographer 20 years Kander’s junior, for 35 years. They married in Toronto two years ago.

Kander thinks about mortality, “a lot. You can’t be 85 and oblivious to it, but that also makes you aware of the value of life. While you’re alive you have to be alive. You’re eager not to waste your time, to fill it with things that are pleasures — and working is a pleasure for me.” After we meet he is seeing a doctor, he smiles, “to find out if I’m dying or not”. I call the next day. “The check-up was good,” Kander laughs. “I may have a few days left.”

**Cabaret, Savoy Theatre, London WC2 (0844 8717687), until Jan 19**



### Culture notes Sacred harp, the new choir craze Kate Mossman

It sounds like a chaotic church choir, or a breakneck run-through of *Carmina Burana*. Sacred harp — a kind of American choral music characterised by its terrific volume, simplified notation and accessibility to complete amateurs — has also been described as the “ultimate pub singing”. It’s found its way onto the latest Bruce Springsteen album *Wrecking Ball* and Nick Cave’s Prohibition-era movie *Lawless* and there’s a documentary narrated by Cerys Matthews coming to Radio 4 later this month.

Harald Grundner from Germany wears his songbook clipped to the belt of his combat trousers. He is from a heavy metal background and holds his monthly singings in a former air-raid shelter in Bremen. Magda Gryzsko, an effervescent 35 year-old from Warsaw, swapped her anarcho-punk band Out of Tune Wives for sacred harp (also known as “shape note singing”) when the band got too mainstream; she says it’s the only choir that will take you “when you cannot sing”.

We’re at Camp Fasola in Poland, the first European boot camp for sacred harp singers. There are several sessions a month in London now; more in Yorkshire, the North East, Ireland and all over Europe, and it’s growing. But you can’t go and listen to it; you have to take part. In sacred harp tradition, “performance” is a dirty word.



It’s funny that music drenched in tradition should prove to be so inclusive. Sacred harp is the strangest mixture of freedom and restraint, energy and formality. Singers work from one standardised book, *The Sacred Harp* (a poetic name for the human voice), which contains 500 songs by Protestant writers. The genre has been kept alive for the past 200 years in the weatherboard chapels of the American South. Our camp begins with a panel discussion on “rules and etiquette” led by singers from Alabama: “Should we applaud ourselves after a particularly good song?” “Should we allow new singers to sit on the front bench with the experts?”

Yet anyone can take part and the vast majority who do can’t read music; there are no auditions, no solos, no painstaking rehearsals, no once-a-term concert for family and friends. “I went to one of those ‘can’t sing’ choirs near where I live,” says a chap from North London who works for the council, “and in 15 hours’ tuition we only learnt three songs. One was *Blue Velvet*. We spent a whole session learning how to pronounce the letter S.”

At an all-day sacred harp session you are more likely to rattle through 30 or 40 tunes. Eimear O’Donovan, 21, from Cork in Ireland has practically lost her voice — this is her eighth day of straight singing, she tells me — and

then a spontaneous session erupts in the bar behind us and she’s off; she just can’t help it. The young Irish singers’ ale-enriched sacred harp sessions don’t sit too well with the Americans, for whom the music remains an act of faith, but camp leader David Ivey from Alabama insists, “We leave politics and religion at the door.” That’s just as well, because among the European newcomers enraptured by his music are students, lefties, hippies, NGO workers, gay people and some who have no religion at all.

“I come to it from a folk background, from a love of the mouldering graves,” says one of the Cork crew. Earthy human values permeate these songs; *No 158, Funeral Thought*, was written for a child who died on a sea voyage by her father, the missionary and clergyman Reginald Heber. As the valiant, major-key tune rings out, you can’t help but imagine that those original singers — buttoned up in black collars and bonnets, wrestling with tropical heat, disease and isolation — were comforted by the simple act of singing. If there is a Christian mission behind the spread of sacred harp they are doing a good job of keeping it quiet. The only thing you are asked to do is belt your heart out and ride the buzz you get from it, again and again.

I’m sitting next to Aaron, a 37-year-old Jewish actor and yoga teacher living in Paris. He recently introduced sacred harp to his yoga classes. We’re listening to a talk by Dan Brittain, one of the most respected living composers of the music, whose best-known song, *Cobb* (“No 313”), combines slow, stately rhythms and hair-raising harmonies. Aaron has been wearing sunglasses for the entire class; I assume he is trying to look cool in the presence of his musical hero, then I realise he’s crying. “Have you seen this thing?” he whispers, pointing at the music on the page. “It’s like opening a portal on to another world.”

**There is all-day sacred harp singing at St Mary’s Parish Centre, London NW10, on Saturday; the Radio 4 documentary will be broadcast on December 3**

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