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A family show at the Skylight: The Cabots return



Colin and Paula Cabot have taken a break from their farm to return to the Skylight Opera.



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Milwaukee thought it knew Colin Cabot, the man who followed founder Clair Richardson in building the Skylight Opera Theatre into a treasured local institution.

Harvard grad. Bow tie. Boyish grin.

So breezy and affable, he could charm the birds out of trees. Scion of an affluent and distinguished East Coast family. Single person most responsible for the development of the Third Ward's Broadway Theatre Center.

But that was so 20th century. In the new millennium, Colin Cabot lives in rural New Hampshire, and his neighbors know him as a blacksmith, sawmill hand and owner of oxen.

Rather than sitting down at a piano in a black tuxedo, he is more likely to be dirtying his hands rebuilding a 15-foot high dam or toting a bale of certified organic hay. The dam is on and the hay is grown on the 400-acre Sanborn Hills Farm that has been home to Cabot and his wife, singer-actress Paula Dewey Cabot, since they moved from Milwaukee a dozen years ago.

Just as they thoroughly devoted themselves to theater for several decades here, the couple is now completely focused on running their historic traditional working farm. They have traded lush melodies and comic ditties for the cacophony of pigs, sheep, turkeys and chickens. They now keep time to the drip, drip, drip of maple syrup.

However, the Cabots were back in a rehearsal hall at the Broadway Theatre Center last week, Colin at a piano and Paula warming up her voice. "How are you going to keep 'em down on the farm once they've seen Parea?" Colin cracked, with the trademark twinkle in his eyes and voice.

The couple has returned to perform an original musical revue, "The Long and Short of It," which opens with a sold out performance on New Year's Eve. The show runs through Jan. 10 in the Studio Theatre at the Broadway Theatre Center.

Skylight artistic director Bill Theisen thought a return of the Cabots would be a fitting way to punctuate the company's 50th anniversary season. "They are so much a part of Skylight history," he said last week. Theisen did not have to do a lot of arm twisting to make it happen.

Each Cabot admits to occasionally missing the stage. Theisen's promise to direct and help them shape the show was all they needed to agree to the brief comeback.

"I owe the Skylight a lot after all of the jobs they gave me," Paula said. She appeared in 20 of the company's productions, including "Candide," "The Threepenny Opera" and "Into the Woods." The couple met when Paula auditioned for the George and Ira Gershwin musical "Oh, Kay!" in 1983.

Colin accompanied her on the piano. She got the job.

"I would come back here and do this only if Bill (Theisen) were the director," Colin said.

Colin moved to Milwaukee in 1974 with his first wife, Wisconsin native Marie Kohler, who wanted to be close to her family. He turned down an administrative internship with the Milwaukee Rep to become the assistant to the late Skylight founder Richardson.

That began a professional relationship of more than two decades that had Cabot serving as Skylight artistic director, managing director and master fund raiser at different times. His literal and figurative vision built the Broadway Theatre Center.

Although Cabot is neither an actor nor a professional singer, and his piano playing is simply competent, he excelled at performing frothy comic revues and theater pieces. Effervescent charm and a flair for gentle shtik made him a crowd pleaser.

In 1997 the Cabots sold their East Side home and headed to New England, with the intention of going back to school in Boston. Inspired by the transformation of the Third Ward, Colin was going to study architecture and urban planning at Harvard. Paula wanted to pursue her interest in Celtic languages and literature.

They chose to live in a rural environment, and while house hunting in New Hampshire, they stumbled across Sanborn Mills Farm, a property that had been in the same family from 1770 to 1996. It is located in Loudon, N.H., 79 miles from Boston.

While the farm needed major refurbishment, it was a historic jewel, according to Colin. Water driven saw and grist mills dated back to the 1830s. There was a blacksmith shop, which now has five forges, and a lot of pre-Industrial Revolution machinery.

The Cabots bought the property and set about exploring sustainable living. Just as Colin painstakingly planned and supervised the building of the Broadway Theatre Center, he has been involved in the restoration and expansion of facilities on the farm. He often works alongside the tradesmen and laborers.

"The farm is about honoring and nurturing old technologies," he said. Fifteen buildings are on the property, and the Cabots accommodate 14 people overnight for workshops on such arcane subjects as tinsmithing, workhorse management and oxen for beginners.

Those plans for the couple to return to school were never realized. "The farm has become all consuming," Cabot said.

How did this urbane Yankee, raised in New York City, become such a dedicated, back to basics farmer? "Nobody in Milwaukee knew that my family owned a gentleman's farm -- near West Point -- and for me that has always been a way of life," Cabot explained.

The Skylight's financial and leadership crises this past summer took Colin away from the farm for several months when he returned to Milwaukee to raise money and be the company's temporary artistic director. While Paula stayed back in New Hampshire to manage Sanborn Mills, she did spend 10 days here to rehearse "The Long and Short of It" with Theisen and her husband. The couple returned to the Broadway Theatre Center rehearsal hall about two weeks ago.

"The Long and Short of It" will consist of about 90 minutes of anecdotes about the colorful Clair Richardson, the crazy performers the Cabots have known, audience behavior and auditioning. With Colin accompanying her, Paula will sing the songs of Stephen Sondheim, Harold Arlen and others. Different veteran Skylight performers including Kurt Ollmann, Norman Moses, Kay Stiefel and Elaine Parsons-Herro will join the Cabots for a song or two at each performance.

A sketch parodying "Private Lives" is also in the works. "This is going to be a family event," Colin said, referring to the Skylight family of performers, staff and audience. The Cabots are back home for the holidays.

More Information ...  
[Skylight Opera Theatre](#)  
158 N. Broadway  
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<http://www.skylightopera.com/>

Event information:

**[The Long and Short of It: A Night with Colin and Paula Cabot](#)**

Thursday, Dec. 31, 12 a.m. - 11:59 p.m.



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