

She has a song to sing

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—It's not often that one person gives others a one-of-a-kind gift that comes from the heart.

Until Sunday evening in Pittsburgh, the last time I'd heard Bev sing was almost 50 years ago. She was the female lead, Fiona, in our senior class play, "Brigadoon," a Lerner-and-Loewe musical that's set in the mid-20th Century.

Brigadoon is a Scottish village that appears for one day every 100 years. Two New Yorkers, Tommy and Jeff, in search of different life meanings happen upon its 1750 magic as they're hunting in the highlands.

Tommy finds pure love with Fiona, a love that triumphs over reality. At the end, he joins her as Jeff watches the village vanish into the heathers and mist-eries.

Peabody classmates who saw our 1963 production remember that we did a good job. Our leads could sing; our dancers could dance; our comics were funny; our bit players had a little bite.

My miniscule claim to notoriety was that I, Archie Beaton, had fathered the kid, Harry, who tried to ruin the disappear-reappear "miracle" for the entire town. Harry came by his disruptiveness honestly.

Our director, Miss (not Ms.) Ruth Nirella, had graduated Peabody in 1929. She was still sweet on her classmate, Gene Kelly, who played Tommy in the 1954 movie version.

Our play was carried by the remarkable singing of Tommy and Fiona. Tommy -- my friend, Paul -- had a mellow baritone that filled the stage with innate clarity. As a doctor, he served as the Medical Director of the Florida Department of Health, Bureau of HIV/AIDS where he improved and saved thousands of lives.

Fiona, well, this is a wee bit of her grand story.

Bev was born with a singing voice. At five feet, she sang like a big-slugger soprano who could hit it a mile. Hearing her sing made us smile.

She always seemed at home performing on a stage. Maybe this can be learned, but it's easier if you don't have to. What I most remember was how at 17 she could sell a song to the "groundlings" like me who were barely capable of "dumb-shows and noise." She had the ability to see into a song's

soul. At that age, I was happy if I could see the bottom of a glass of root beer.

Her classmates remember her singing in the Peabody auditorium, cheering in the rain and mud for our 1962 City-championship football team and presiding as our junior-class homecoming queen.

She became very smart at managing the older boys who lined up at her door, beginning in the ninth grade. She was the kind of petite girl who never had trouble whittling down six-foot athletes with her big smarts and fast wit. I've always wanted an honest count of the number of juniors and seniors who slunk off after one date.

She earned a full-ride voice scholarship to the Conservatory of Music at Oberlin College where she studied opera/performance.

And then, after one year, she left Oberlin to go to New York.

She cut a pop record. Businessmen told her things. Promises were not kept. Things were expected. The music business treated her badly. She was broke. She came home.

She stopped singing in the mid-60s. She says she didn't know what to do with it.

She married quickly and to the wrong guy.

They adopted an infant, Lee.

Within a couple of days, Bev has told me she knew that something was wrong. It was severe cerebral palsy. Lee's mind was fine. He was smart and funny. But he was bound to a wheelchair and eventually lost almost all physical ability.

They could have pitched Lee back into the adoption pool. Life would have been easier had she done that. But instead, she said, he's ours, I love him, we made a deal, I'm keeping him.

Her husband made it plain that Lee was her project, not his. They divorced several years later.

She was a single Mom with a profoundly disabled child. She went back to college for a degree and a trade. She started her own public-relations business. She supported them.

I saw glimpses of the amount of work, physical labor, worry, advocacy fighting, assistance, money and love that it took to keep Lee functioning and give him a chance at a productive life. 24/7 doesn't do it justice. It was full-time, all the time.

When I met him as a teenager, Lee spoke with his Mom through sign. Bev would translate for friends. Later, he got computer software, "Minspeak," which allowed him to communicate and crack jokes. He

graduated high school and was inducted into the National Honor Society, as was Bev before him.

Several guys came through these years. One, in particular, Dave, a talented Pittsburgh television personality, shared in Lee's care for five years. Bev's expectations for men, including Lee, were very high. Guys rarely met them, but Lee, I think, never disappointed her.

You wanted Bev on your side even if it was sometimes hard to have her there. She knew that she was not easy. Her eye knew a diamond from paste, and her tongue could cut and polish one, and trash the other.

Seventeen years ago, she met Doug, a psychologist who had family history with a kid like Lee. They married, and he got the package.

From the mid-60s to beyond Lee's death in 2002 at 29, there was no singing.

She's said to me that she never thought that she had sacrificed her singing for Lee. She said, rather, that it was her privilege to be his mother.

And then last Sunday night at six, there was song again.

Her show was "Shut Up and Sing!" The Playbill art drew her lying crosswise over a grand piano with one bare leg straight in the air. I don't know many 67-year-old women who think this way. I'm glad I know at least one.

She was where she should be—on a stage she made intimate with a three-man band led by David Michael Ed, a terrific pianist and director.

Bev sang 26 songs, finishing with an encore aria from Bizet's "Carmen." It occurred to me that I couldn't take 26 deep breaths without falling over.

Most of her audience of 150 knew her story. The songs she gave us said how she felt about it all. Love—"Til There was You," "I'll Be Seeing You." Men—"Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," "Shop Around," "Hit the Road Jack." Life—"I'm Still Here," "I Will Survive." Self—"I Feel Pretty," "I've Got the Music in Me." These selections were not coy or subtle. Things were what they were, and are what they are.

Her audience was stunned by the power of her mezzo soprano and the evocativeness of her singing. I looked around. Everyone was smiling. She gave us joy.

My thought was that this was Bev's statement to us and to herself. Put in a Brigadoonish brogue: I dinna, but I coulda and still canna.

Many of us, I think, have always had a what-if question in our minds about her life. What if she'd gotten a break? What if she'd had enough money to push through the first rocky years of the music business? What if Lee had not had cerebral palsy?

Bev doesn't play what-ifs. Lee was Bev's song, the one she chose to sing.

Her soiree was a benefit for SHOUT, a non-profit organization that finds employment for individuals who use augmentative communication devices. (www.shoutacc.org; shout@shoutacc.org.)

A DVD is in the works.

At the end of the post-performance party, her high-school buddies were hanging around with several of her close friends. Out of the mist-eries, she and Paul began singing again, "From This Day On." It was soft, nice and sweet—words I don't use much.

We were privileged to share this evening with her.

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