THE STAGE

Watch and learn: more platforms needed for master performers

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Betty Buckley in Dear World at the Charing Cross Theatre, London. Photo: Tristram Kenton

"Is Betty Buckley still alive?" asked US president Donald Trump back in March during his inaugural address to the board of Washington's Kennedy Center as the venue's new **self-appointed chairman**. "Of all the great voices and stars, bigger stars than her, she had the best voice," Trump eulogised, as he also praised the merits of the musical Cats, recalling his visit to the original Broadway production and Buckley's Tony award-winning performance as Grizabella within it.

Well, president Trump, I am pleased to report that Ms Buckley is very much alive and well. Last week, she completed her eighth annual New York residency at the Public Theater's iconic Joe's Pub, where she gave a masterclass in song interpretation and delivery. Her 80-minute set, performed with a four-piece band is, as she describes, "like a gallery of different paintings" that she chooses each time.

Worth the price of admission alone was Buckley's interpretation of Memory in a new arrangement. The famous song (with lyrics by Trevor Nunn) from Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical Cats, which is based on TS Eliot's poems, has taken on a level of infamy for Buckley since she demanded that Lloyd Webber seek a cease-and-desist order preventing her recording of the song being played at Trump's rallies.

Attention was again then reigned down upon Buckley in March when Trump praised her singing and his remarks went viral. Buckley is classy enough not to directly mention Trump in her performance. Instead, she illustrates how a song can say a million words, where her careful set list selection makes telling points and a powerful rebuttal. Songs by Bob Dylan and Bernard Ighner were among those performed before her set ended with Memory. It felt like a clear reclamation of the song that has been significant within Buckley's career and which she will never allow to be corrupted or politicised.

The song also takes on a deeper resonance as Buckley is close in age to TS Eliot's character of Grizabella in the musical. Watching Buckley perform it, I thought about how exciting it would be to see her play the role again in an actual production of the musical. With last year's hit Off-Broadway **ballroom version of Cats** slated for a Broadway transfer – and another Broadway legend André De Shields being cast at the right age to play Old Deuteronomy – the idea of seeing Buckley appear beside him as Grizabella, surrounded by a talented group of artists from New York's underground ballroom scene, would be a genuine event on Broadway and serve as the ultimate retort at Trump.

Back at Joe's Pub, Buckley tells a killer story about being a young actor in New York and getting a standing ticket to watch Sarah Vaughan at Carnegie Hall where her performance of Ighner's song Everything Must Change had a profound influence upon her. Buckley then goes on to perform her own version of the song that's become a classic in her repertoire. In 1996, she too headlined Carnegie Hall and included the number in that set. In her recent residency, Buckley illustrates how – like other legendary musical artists such as Patti LuPone, Lorna Dallas, Kristin Chenoweth, Lea Salonga, Audra McDonald, Judy Garland, Frances Ruffelle, Eartha Kitt, Mandy Patinkin, Bernadette Peters and Ute Lemper – her star quality is down to her ability to play and connect with audiences both in the large auditorium and the intimate room. Such performances thus afford valuable masterclasses in delivery and interpretation, whether live or recorded, that should be compulsory viewing for any musical theatre scholar and those interested in creating a solo cabaret or concert show.

Interest in this fluid art form has far from abated among today's artists but **more platforms are needed** to allow these performers to play, watch and learn from an artist such as Buckley. Next month, Adelaide will host its 25th annual cabaret festival, a visionary event that is still unrivalled. Meanwhile, I continue to lament the loss of Divas at the Donmar, founding artistic director Sam Mendes' annual season of cabaret with headline stars, which was cut from its programming after his departure. These presentations, which included a season by Buckley in 2000, offered audiences (especially artists) the chance for a close-up study of technique and delivery.

Today, some of our younger leading musical artists playing main-stage concerts can have a habit of delivering sets with a lot of belting chest voice but take fewer risks and place an over-reliance upon the hit musical song they are best known for.

That's not to demerit the talent of any such artist; it's simply that with fewer opportunities to watch and learn than previous artists who went before them, the art form's evolution is affected. This sometimes leaves these shows feeling saccharin and formulaic in structure when contrasted to earlier musical theatre greats. My recent night watching Buckley perform at Joe's Pub was a visceral one, and I hope for more precious memories like it.