

BOXBLUR



Review: Rufus Wainwright performs behind plexiglass at Catharine Clark Gallery

By: Tony Bravo

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Rufus Wainwright performs behind plexiglass for a socially distanced audience of 22 people at Catharine Clark Gallery as part of the BOXBLUR initiative. Photo: Timothy Cummings

Being part of a very small group that sees any artist in performance is a deeply intimate and potentially moving experience. There's something to be said for proximity. That part alone is special, but when you have an artist of Rufus Wainwright's intensity, it's like being in the middle of a weather event.

He's a singer with a big tenor voice, and behind a plexiglass screen it's like witnessing a caged animal trying to break free. This isn't a comment on the acoustics or sound in the Catharine Clark Gallery where he performed Saturday, Nov. 21: Wainwright is a lot to contain on a stage the size of the Fillmore or Carnegie Hall. At 25% capacity in the white-box gallery space, every note he sang and every gesture he made felt magnified to larger-than-life proportions.

This wasn't like other Wainwright shows I've attended prior to the pandemic. Temperatures were checked at the door. Contact tracing information was taken. We were all, expectedly, masked for the duration of the night. Even Wainwright entered wearing a mask before taking his place at the piano placed behind a plexiglass screen. And there were more than 6 feet of distance between him and the first row of seats for the 22 people at the performance designed as the centerpiece in artist Timothy Cummings' exhibition "Muse." The concert was part of Catharine Clark Gallery's Boxblur series.

The scale of his performance felt operatic, but in a chamber setting. I mean literally operatic — among the pieces he sang was the aria "Les Feux D'Artifice T'Appellent" from his opera "Prima Donna," which was produced during the pandemic in Sweden this year. The Steinway piano Wainwright played on as well as the oversize commedia dell'arte toy theater set pieces and trompe l'oeil curtain designed by Cummings that surrounded him reinforced the intimacy of the night, a reminder of the boxed-in lives we're leading during the shelter periods.

At times Wainwright moved his body so much as he sang and played piano that he gave the impression he might buck up against the set or the plexiglass (he didn't: It was a stage distance illusion). Appropriate for the setting, he opened with "The Art Teacher" from the second album in his "Want" duo.

"I feel like I'm at a zoo or am an exhibit," he joked after the first song. "I'm a Wainwright."



Rufus Wainwright performs behind plexiglass for a socially distanced audience of 22 people at Catharine Clark Gallery as part of the Boxblur initiative. Photo: Timothy Cummings

Sharing stories about his early days playing San Francisco in the late 1990s when he first met artist Cummings, Wainwright said that he developed a following in the city before other music scenes knew who the young singer was. Later, he referred to the Catharine Clark Gallery's show of Cummings' work and wall of portraits of the singer.

"Everyone should have their own wall in a gallery show," he quipped.

The song "Early Morning Madness" from his 2020 album "Unfollow the Rules" felt lyrically appropriate to the year, which the singer acknowledged (it's about a hangover): "Early morning madness, everything is wrong. Early morning sadness, everything is crap and long. Gotta take a nap later on, then the early morning longing will be gone." Wainwright stopped and started sections of the song a few times, saying "I haven't done a show in a while, I want to get it right." He shared that he has had to cancel five tours this year because of the pandemic.

When he sang “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” and “Poses” from his breakthrough 2001 album “Poses,” the audience became noticeably excited for the early favorites. He moved on to “I’m Going to a Town” from 2007’s “Release the Stars,” a song whose lyrics “I’m going to a place that has already been disgraced. I’m gonna see some folks who have already been let down. I’m so tired of America,” he said he hoped wouldn’t feel as relevant after the election of Joe Biden this year, but which he still felt rang true in the current moment.

He closed the night with a haunting rendition of Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah.” Before the concert, filmmakers [Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine](#) showed an excerpt of Wainwright in their in-progress documentary about the song, “Hallelujah — It Goes Like This.” He returned with the wistful “Complainte de la butte” from the “Moulin Rouge!” soundtrack as an encore.



Timothy Cummings and Rufus Wainwright stand in front of Cummings’ installation at his show “Muse” at Catharine Clark Gallery. Photo: Catharine Clark Gallery

The audience response was ecstatic, but the post-performance spell was broken by necessary safety measures. After the encore we were directed out of the space by row,

and there would be no congregating inside. Through the windows you saw sanitation measures already taking place once the space was cleared.

As a first experience of its kind for me since the March shutdown, there were parts of my brain that switched back on seeing a live concert that hadn't been active in months. I went home exhausted but thrilled from just being in the room with a performer expending so much energy.

The catharsis from the concert was multidimensional. Wainwright is a singer I have followed since high school, a time where there were very few, commercially available out gay singer-songwriters, so he has a specific cultural resonance with me. This is the third time I've seen him perform live but, even with social distance, I've never been this close to him during a show. At times it was emotional, and I tried to dab at my eyes in a way that wouldn't upset my mask, or let the occasional tear slip down into it.

But the night was memorable for reasons outside my personal connection to Wainwright. There were entire songs where for a few minutes, the pandemic, looming shutdowns and other concerns were not at the forefront of my mind. I got to be an audience member again. Hallelujah.

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