

Leander's performance captivates

The Manor put under a spell by artist's amazing talent

By Bea Smith
Staff Writer

It takes more than guts for a performer of Jewish origin — and whose grandparents were Holocaust survivors — to reenact in musical and dramatic fashion the story of Sweden's movie star, Zarah Leander, Hitler's and Goebles' favorite singer.

It actually takes a tremendous acting and singing talent and versatility to enable one to convince an audience that this is sheer entertainment — and nothing more.

Olivia Stevens, who was born in Stockholm, Sweden, stands alone in her effort to show the world that the unthinkable can be accomplished. She has effectively done so in her presentation of "Pleasure and Peril — The Story of Zarah Leander," on March 13 at The Manor in West Orange.

She is over and above an actress and chanteuse, whose energy and verve, deep-throated voice and overwhelming talents and beauty — a combination of Elizabeth Taylor, from the nose up, and Annette Benning from the nose down — can bring the house down. And that's exactly what she did, with the accompaniment of her pianist, David Pearl, up in Le Dome, the Nightclub under the Stars.

Was it merely a few hours earlier that another type of entertainment and savory appeal were offered in the Terrace Lounge at The Manor last Thursday?

With the friendly maitre d', Sammy Odeh, the equally polite head waiter, Alex, the splendid musical offerings by pianist-extraordinaire, Bobby Richards, and a four-course meal fit for the gods, preparation for an unusually interpretative evening was in the works.

My companion and I were delighted with the chef's delicacy, a tiny cup of delicious red pepper bisque alongside a small mount of shrimp serviche. And for the first course, I selected an unbelievably superb cream of wild mushroom soup that sent my tastebuds right through the roof. My companion was delighted with her choice of lobster ravioli, with shaved fennel, salmon roe in saffron sauce.

Richards' soothing interpretations of "Clar de Lune," "These Foolish Things Remind Me Of You" and "I've Got the World On A String," aided the digestion when we dove into the tasty endive and mache salad featuring fresh herbs, Anjou pear, roquefort and walnut vinaigrette.

He further entertained us with "My Funny Valentine," a birthday request, and a little bit of Chopin

and Rachmaninoff as I enjoyed the tender, marvelous Diver Sea scallops with baby vegetables in English mustard sauce. My companion equally enjoyed her cooked to perfection wild king salmon, which was slowly poached in Spanish virgin olive oil with wilted local spinach in a mussel-saffron sauce.

The music of Billie Holiday accompanied a most unusual dessert of warm apple pot pie with candied apple crisp, creme Anglaise, butter pecan ice cream and coffee for me, and tea for my companion.

With a grateful nod to the delights of Mitchell Altholz, executive chef, and a bow to Richards' "As Time Goes By," we climbed the winding staircase to experience the star of The Manor's cabaret — the intimitable Stevens of stage, television and movies.

This past year, Stevens has been performing her one-woman show, "Pleasure and Peril," which features the life and songs of Leander, the "controversial darling of stage and screen in Nazi Germany," premiered as part of Kabarett Fete, which has been awarded a 2008 Back Stage Bistro award for Special Event.

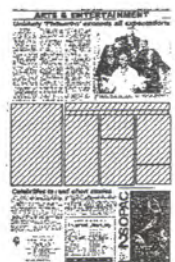
The Bistro Awards will be April 7 at the Gotham Comedy Club in New York City. She also has traveled to perform the French version at the Avignon Theatre Festival and in Sweden at the Krapperrup Castle as part of the Stockholm Culture Festival. Last November, Stevens performed the show at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

Here at The Manor, she intrigued the audience by beginning her unusual act, with her back to the audience, microphone in hand and adorned in a striking black gown, which she utilized to accentuate the wild events in the life of the Nazis' "darling."

Then, in a deep, sultry, provocative voice and body movement, she turned to The Manor audience and sang "So, You Want to Be A Star" in Swedish and English.

Her other numbers, dramatically offered in German, Swedish, French and English, which told of the pleasures and grief, often hidden unhappiness, of Leander, stunned the audience into acceptance and submission.

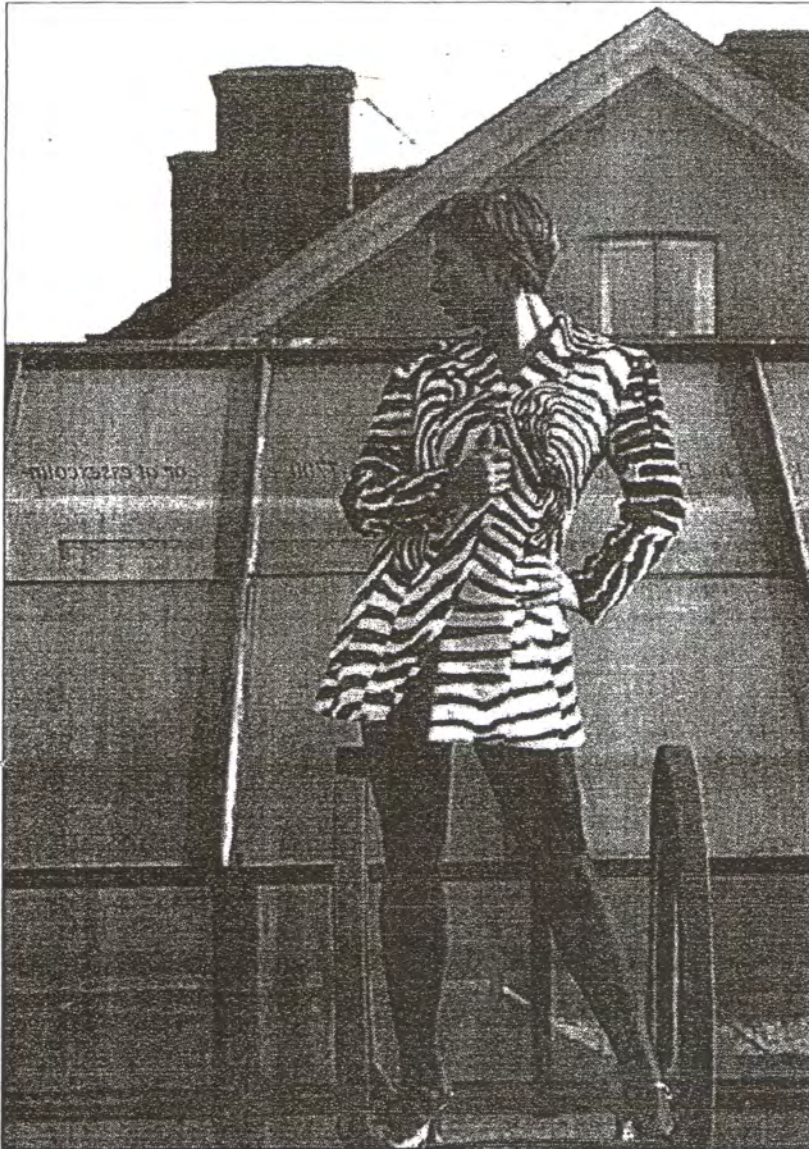
Numbers that ran the gamut of Leander's turbulent life, such as "It All Began with a Glass of Wine," "I Know a Miracle Will Happen," "Wonderland At Night" and "Never Cry For Love," were compounded in a frenzy of emotions that Stevens utilized to reach her astounded audience. Highlighting the high tensions of the evening were Stevens sensual "Wunderbar" and "This Isn't the End of the



World." She described Leander's tyranny in a wicked version of "The Sin Was Wonderful," and ending with an encore of "Each Time I Hear a Churchbell Ring."

Stevens, as no other cabaret performer at The Manor could accomplish, entertained and drained the audience, all at the same time.

When she regains her composure and her ultimate strength in the future, the patrons of The Manor would appreciate another encore performance.



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