

Lite a cabaret

A singer from Mount Isa is the must-see gig at this year's Brisbane Cabaret Festival, writes **Sandra McLean**

THEY must be music's odd couple – a quietly intense violinist-composer and a fresh-faced country girl with an explosive voice. But somehow their relationship works and, together, John Rodgers and Megan Sarmardin make beautiful music.

The result of their latest collaboration is a new show called *Passionfruit Vine*, which arts scene gossip has earmarked as the must-see gig at this year's Brisbane Cabaret Festival.

The show marks the 21-year-old Sarmardin's solo debut in Brisbane after appearing alongside Rodgers at last year's cabaret festival.

The enigmatic Rodgers' influence won't be too far away, however. He has written all the songs in Sarmardin's set, including the title number *Passionfruit Vine*.

Last year Sarmardin was a knockout at the festival, amazing all with her searing vocals and look-at-me stage presence. Cabaret festival organiser Sandro Colarelli was determined to have this fresh-faced singer from Mount Isa back again.

For Colarelli, Sarmardin represents the new direction he wants cabaret to take in the 21st century. It's a direction which harks back to the highly political and slightly dangerous nature of cabaret in the 1930s but takes a big step away from the daggy tag the genre has been fighting since the 1970s and 1980s. The focus, at least for Colarelli, is on edgy, young, uncensored and intimate.

"Megan is a wonderfully talented young person who is bright and charismatic on stage," Colarelli says. "She has that youthful exuberance we are looking for and she isn't singing the old tunes by Stephen Sondheim. They have their place, sure, but she has a more popular orientation. And she can achieve that connection between performance and audience so easily. To me she is like a Christine Anu."

Sarmardin is excited by the chance to show off her talent in the big smoke. Her ambition is to have a career as a performer in music and the theatre.

"I would really like to see where singing takes me because it is what I love to do," she says. "The cabaret festival is great for me because it means a lot of exposure and a new experience as well."

Not that Sarmardin needs much more experience as a singer. She has been singing songs to anyone who would listen since she was six years old.

Sarmardin started playing guitar when she was eight and studied the violin, saxophone and flute at school. She displayed a natural talent for these instruments but Sarmardin now says that her preferred instrument is her voice.

In Mount Isa she is a familiar figure.



a performer at many local community events including Australia Day ceremonies and talent quests.

"My family is pretty much right into music," says Sarmardin, whose family has Aboriginal, Russian, Indonesian and German heritage. "So I have grown up with it for most of my life. I started singing in our local country music club and I don't think I have stopped. I am happy to sing on my own or with other people. I just like to sing."

Sarmardin, whose day job is working as an administrative assistant at the Regional and Remote Health Service, has no need for other people's songs. Rodgers is more than capable of supplying her with her own.

This accomplished violinist and composer brings to their collaboration a distinctive approach to music that has seen him work with a wide range of groups and organisations such as Elision, the Australian Art Orchestra, the Robyn Archer Band and his own musical creation, the sex-and-death cult rock band Madam Bone's Brothel.

composed music for theatre shows *Radiance* and *Fountains Beyond the Sunshine Club*.

He first started working with Sarmardin when she performed in *Bob Cat Dancing* as part of the 2003 Queensland Music Festival. Rodgers had composed the music for this Mount Isa event and he felt he could work well with Sarmardin. The young singer also felt a certain simpatico.

JOHN is pretty funny and he has a great sense of humour," she says. "But I think it is our love of music which makes us work well together. We have the same interests in that way."

This year their partnership was made official with Sarmardin named as one of 14 young artists in Spark, a national mentoring program supported by the Australia Council and managed by Youth Arts Queensland. Rodgers was chosen as her mentor and the songs they have created for the Cabaret Festival are part of the result

for country girl



as part of the festival she will be the youngest performer on the bill.

The five-year-old festival that keeps growing with every outing has put into practice a broad definition of cabaret. Performers include a stunt violinist, queen of the musical dreamscape Rhonda Burchmore, the Queensland Gothic of the hilarious Kransky Sisters and the pop sensibilities of George's Tyrone Noonan.

Margret Roadknight returns to Brisbane for the festival, while infrequent performer Brian Cavanagh has composed a show that juxtaposes howling like a dog and scatting like a soprano. Local ladies Leah Cotterell and Carita Farrer will sing a tribute to Cole Porter and Queenie Van De Zandt will introduce us to her alter ego, Jan Van De Stool.

Newcomers to this year's festival include Melbourne Comedy Festival import *Angels Brought Me Here*, which offers an hour in the life of Cliff Withheld, an underclass hero whose story starts when he is caught

Colarelli, who helped found the Brisbane Cabaret Festival in 2000, makes no apologies for this eclectic line-up.

The variety, he argues, is a sign that cabaret is alive and well as more performers turn to this intimate, economic form to indulge their art and connect with audiences.

Brisbane was the first major city in Australia to start a cabaret festival, and in 2001 Adelaide joined the trend. Music festivals such as the QFM have started incorporating cabaret into their programs at special venues such as the Spiegel tent.

"With the state of the arts being what it is, cabaret is a good way for people to get new projects up and running," Colarelli says.

"You don't need a lot of money to do what you want. And you don't need to explain yourself to funding bodies to get money. You end up doing something because you want to — cabaret gives you more of a licence to do what you want to do."

Megan Sarmardin in *Passionfruit Vine*,



MUSIC'S odd couple . . . John Rodgers and Megan Sarmardin, above, and Sarmardin, inset.