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## Cabaret

Invitation, Leah Cotterell, Metro Arts Theatre  
By NEVILLE MEYERS

# An invitation from an honest performer

LEAH Cotterell exploited some of the best, more unconventional elements of fringe theatre in her opening performance of *Invitation* at the Metro Arts Theatre on Wednesday.

Cotterell, who scripted the 90-minute, largely autobiographical show herself, told her audience: "I employ the process of music and words to trace the past and answer the basic question — 'Why do I spend my life in smoky bars?'"

Her performance had bite, warmth and intelligence and flagged rarely (no mean feat, given the central character's expansive musings).

There were a handful of dialogue faux pas and incorrect musical cues on opening night which needed tidying but neither Cotterell nor the enthusiastic audience seemed to mind.

The performance worked overall because Cotterell delivered a fresh mixture of gritty monologue, vocals, jokes, stage mannerisms and fresh insights.

She was also backed by a fine jazz trio — pianist Steve Russell, bassist Peter Walters and drummer Ken Edie — who both provided excellent accompaniment and shone in their two contrasting versions of the show's signature tune, Bronislaw Kaper's *Invitation*.

The same ingredients worked equally

well for Cotterell's *Blues in the Night* extended season at the Metro in April last year.

In *Invitation*, however, the singer plunges further into both witty introspection and mocking self-revelation — all part of the search for the "significant other" in her life.

The first half of the performance was mainly monologue — and a few songs — as Cotterell peeled away the stages of her personal and musical maturity (a deliberately overstated *Delilah*, *William Taylor*, a yearningly retrospective folk song, the rock ballad *You don't own Me*, and a Billie Holiday-based, highly moving *In my Solitude*).

In the second act, Cotterell swapped her maroon dressing gown and hair curlers for a black, coarse lace dress, and the monologue for more songs (*Lilac Wine*, *I put a spell on You*, *Strange Fruit* and others) to balance romantic yearnings and gritty realism, dependence and independence — a somewhat bleak journey.

She concluded with a heartfelt rendition of Joni Mitchell's uplifting *Cary*, which showed the angst had been worthwhile. *Invitation* runs from Wednesday to Sunday, with an additional performance on Fridays, until June 3.