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Music

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Playful and Raw, With a Touch of Cat

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

It isn't enough to describe Camille O'Sullivan as merely a singer. During an appearance at the Irish Arts Center on Thursday evening, she made the cabaret and rock songs in her challenging international program a musical play, with dramatic lighting and props and a focal character, which she more than ably embodied. Tom Waits, Nick Cave, Jacques Brel and Leonard Cohen are among those whose works she inhabited with a ferocious commitment to unearthing their truths.

The songs became surreal production numbers at a carnival sideshow, especially Mr. Waits's "God's Away on Business" and "All the World Is Green." Like few others, Ms. O'Sullivan brought to life Mr. Waits's Dadaist X-ray vision of the human comedy.

Depending on the song and the character, Ms. O'Sullivan's voice varied from dark and smoky to feral, and her excellent musicians (Feargal Murray on keyboards, Andrew Zinsmeister on guitar, and Dan Weiner on drums) created settings that varied from a dreamlike, piano-based cabaret with a Weimar flavor to full-scale rock.

On the softer end, the narrator of Mr. Brel's "Amsterdam," with its observations of sailors

and prostitutes, suggested an exhausted, cynical onlooker (perhaps a retired prostitute) depicting that Dutch seaport as a decaying flesh market.

On the more aggressive end, in her version of Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," she became the free-spirited woman triumphantly kissing off a lover. It was one of several numbers in which Ms. O'Sullivan's voice recalled the frayed scream of Janis Joplin.

There was abject longing in her rendition of the Radiohead ballad "True Love Waits," and cosmic despair on the Nine Inch Nails anguished "Hurt," a self-lacerating rock ballad whose narrator declares to any prospective lover, "I will let you down/I will make you hurt."

Ms. O'Sullivan also has a playful side, skillfully wolf whistling and at one point leading the audience in a chorus of "meows." She reminds you of a cat that, if you play too roughly with it, will learn quickly, and play as roughly as you.

Ms. O'Sullivan performs through Saturday at the Irish Arts Center, 553 West 51st Street, Manhattan; 866-811-4111, irishartscenter.org.