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REVIEW OF "E.E.! (VIVA CUMMINGS)": A Musical Review Conceived and Composed by Steve Scotti

(Blue Heron Arts Center, New York City, April 16, 1999)
David V. Forrest, M.D.

Arriving in a downpour, we were greeted by Ardelle Stryker, chairman of the Blue Heron Arts Center, who enthusiastically showed us the new theatre, its unfinished facade still under a blue tarp. She told us the production has a booking agent and will soon tour colleges beginning with Suffolk College. She directed us to Jimmy Chen's Chinese restaurant at 25th and Third, where Norman and Zelda Friedman, John and Jay Cowan, and Barry Dordick joined me for a splendid repast prior to the performance, including vegetable dumplings, steamed sea bass, chicken with broccoli and sweet and sour chicken, with liberal free wine from Jimmy (and his goil). Dave Eastwood joined us at the theatre.

From the first number, this production of "EE! (Viva Cummings)" capitalizes on the spatial possibilities of the beautiful new Blue Heron Arts Center, with its high ceilings and pewter-colored metal auditorium doors. Maggie Anderson and Meghan Conway, two attractive and lithe young women in blue leotards and black jeans, appear at the top of the audience's steps and operatically trill "Overture.....SKIES MAY BE BLUE," a welcome less familiar poem from *Etcetera: The Unpublished Poems of E. E. Cummings* [as in the program, titles printed in capitals are sung]. David Salyers is at the piano and performing; they are soon joined by Michael Freshko, a sturdy young man whose bold stage manners were honed as Gus Growltiger and Old Deuteronomy in the German production of *Cats*. The audience is played to in all sorts of ways: cajoled, seduced, patted on the back, alcoholically menaced (in "ygUDah!"), and Elvised. The poems are alternately recited and sung, and Steve Scotti's arrangements are reset with a great variety of tones and attitudes interpreting Cummings. There isn't one of the 41 pieces that isn't a pleasure, but some musical standouts were "IF YOU CAN'T

EAT," brilliantly phrased for maximum thrills, the many choruses and dialects of "JIMMIE'S GOT A GOIL," of course "SWEET SPRING," and the finale "I THANK YOU GOD FOR MOST THIS AMAZING DAY." The choreography, by director William Findlay, for "she being brand new" involving one performer crawling up the front and down the back of her partner, was clever and funny, as was that for "IT WAS A GOODLY COMPANY." The production does not shy away from the sociopolitically adamant "RED-RAG AND PINK-FLAG," "THE WAY TO HUMP A COW," and "I SING OF OLAF," and an antiwar letter by Cummings from Christopher Street is read. I have never been a complete fan of Scotti's marching, martially rhythmic setting for "ANYONE LIVED IN A PRETTY HOW TOWN," but the 3 performers play it to the hilt, stomping in unison up and down the audience steps. Some of the dialectic accents used in such pieces as "my uncle" and "first Jock he" and the delightful "I'M VERY FOND OF BLACK BEAN SOUP," also from *Etcetera*, were country Southern, and thus a bit startling when one expects down East accents, but the success of the pieces shows Cummings is transplantable.

Following the performance, Norman Friedman, who like the rest of us greatly enjoyed it, pointed out that Scotti's selections emphasize Cummings' earlier works, especially the lyrical and satiric ones, which lend themselves to theatrical presentation, at the expense of the philosophical. Barry Dordick and I spoke briefly with a young woman who had trained with Michael Freshko. She felt the actors could have enunciated more clearly and had been relying upon the fact that many of the selections were familiar to the audience. Notwithstanding this professional critique, we had been in the back and heard every word. We were more concerned that for wide college performance, some sort of preparation of the audiences might be helpful to let them know the historical setting from which the poems were coming. Ardelle mentioned that the texts might be provided, and one of the staff told us that even preparatory workshops were being considered. As it stands, without any glosses, Cummings will be well served by this delightful production.