



## The Theatre Buff

by Donald Collesler, Jr.

### Lady Day At Emerson's Bar and Grill

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The life and times of Billie Holiday is the subject of the cabaret-drama "Lady Day At Emerson's Bar and Grill," presented by Theatrefest, the professional Equity company in residence at Montclair State College. And a compelling production it is.

Unlike the sanitized and passionless 1972 film, "Lady Sings the Blues" (in reality a vehicle for Diana Ross), "Lady Day at Emerson's..." describes the demons, torments, and triumphs of the legendary jazz performer. Born Elnora Fagan, the granddaughter of a white slave owner, Billie first listens to music in a Baltimore brothel which her mother cleans. After moving to Harlem, Billie becomes a singer almost by accident. Success comes quickly. She moves up from bars to nightclubs such as Small's, to the Apollo and finally to Carnegie Hall. The great saxophonist, Lester Young, gave her the unique name of "Lady Day", and she dubbed him "Pres", as in President. She surpasses in popularity the legendary Bessie Smith, who was her idol.

Yet Lady Day was still Elmora Fagan, a child who was raped when she was ten and also victimized by racism throughout her life. She had four husbands, none of whom was more important than Sonny Monroe ("My first love and worst love"), who first introduced her to the heroin addiction that would take her from a limousine to a Philadelphia courtroom and then to a West Virginia woman's prison for a year and a day. In Mr. Roberson's drama we meet Lady Day years later, but she has never recovered. She jokes about white parole officers with their blue jackets and white socks, but the imprisonment, disgrace and loss of her livelihood has taken a terrible toll on her spirit. Worst of all, she is alone. The four husbands have gone, and even more tragic is the loss of her mother, the woman she refers to as "the Duchess."

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be purchased prior to departure. Cancun has been building hotels at an resulting in an oversupply of rooms. These low cost packages won't last much ntage of them now. Europe during these high season tourist days are still Yugoslavia, Poland, oviect Union. They are good values also. Two week all inclusive trips are 1200.

### This n' That

have arrived in Madison and what a couple they are. The New Jersey opening production has our recommendation for an evening well spent. er goes, know full well that Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet are ragedy, have still rejoiced in their passion. Maurcen Pedala cast as Juliet eo look and act as the play describes them. Cheryl Williams, who plays y, Victoria Boothby, all the cast-Bravo! Well cast, well acted. A few of the to standard, but this did not detract from the overall production. The the choreography by Jozia Mieszkowski, the musical direction, the sets- e Madrigal Singers who greeted us upon arrival, added to the evening and

one since it will mark a milestone for the Festival and Paul Barry. Its ctor. With the opening of KING JOHN in August, the Festival will become rid to have completed Shakespeare's entire 38 play canon. Barry will be e directed all 38 plays. This is the last season for Paul and Ellen Barry have it end with such an accomplishment is notable. n nightly rotation this season will include "MEASURE FOR MEASURE" tion to "ROMEO AND JULIET". For ticket information call 377-4487. will surely be a sell out. The New Jersey Shakespeare Festival is located Madison, New Jersey.

rio Festival Orchestra Series at Waterloo Village opened on Saturday er concert. It was marvelous. er an extensive program over the summer. Included will be rare thestral music, jazz and pop concerts, poetry festivals, conferences, ng for everyone is sure to be found among their offerings. For infor- ckets call 347-0900. Waterloo Village is located on Waterloo Road in

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The setting is a bar in South Philadelphia in 1959, just months before Lady Day died from her addictions. She can barely make it to the nightclub floor and only after she is given her trademark gardenias to wear in her hair. Once performing she sings her trademark songs and reminisces about her life, sometimes to the point where she must call upon Jimmy Powers, her pianist, to "keep me in line." Mr Roberson's play received the Outer Critics Circle Award for the Off-Broadway 1986-87 production for good reason. "Lady Day at Emerson's" is a unique blend of music and drama which captures not only the suffering but also the spirit of Billie Holiday.

The original Off-Broadway production suffered somewhat by the casting of Lonette McKee, who bore no vocal, physical or temperamental resemblances to Lady Day. The Theatrefest production is blessed by the performance of Loretta Devine. A Broadway veteran of Michael Bennett's "Dream Girls" and Bob Fosse's "Big Deal", Ms. Devine is known to television viewers as a member of the cast of "A Different World" and one of the stars of "Sugar and Spice." Nothing in her biography would describe her as a jazz singer, but she is one in this performance. Whether she sings Bessie Smith songs ("A Pig's Foot and A Bottle of Beer"), Fats Waller songs ("Ain't Nobody's Business") or standards ("Them There Eyes") she is a consummate cabaret singer. When she sings the signature songs of Billie Holiday such as "Strange Fruit", she is a superb actress as well as singer. In the most moving moment when Billie sings "God

Bless the Child" (which she wrote for the Duchess, her mother) there is a superb moment of song and theater. I cannot conceive of anyone playing this role better than Loretta Devine.

The Summerfest production, guided by Producer and Artistic Director Phil Ostermann, is excellent. Rahn Coleman is perfect as Jimmy Powers and also is extraordinary in the musical direction and arrangements of more than 20 songs. He is well assisted by Bradford Hays on saxophone, and Jeffrey Wingfield is fine in the non-speaking role of Emerson, the owner-bartender. Finally, substantial credit should also be given to Will Roberson who is equal to the difficult task of staging this cabaret-drama in a proscenium theater without sacrificing the requisite intimacy.

## MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

**Outdoor Concert** featuring the National Chorale on Library Lawn at Fairleigh Dickinson University Friday, July 13th, 7:30 p.m. admission is free.

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**Little Shop of Horrors Auditions** at New Jersey Public Theatre in Berkeley Heights at John E. Runnels Hospital on July 12, 6 p.m. and July 14, 2 p.m. call 322-3808 for more information.

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**"Cyclone in Calico: An Interview with Mary Ann Bickerdyke"** will be performed at The Unitarian Church in Summit during the 9:30 a.m. service on July 15. The church is located at 4 Waldron Ave. in Summit.

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**Special Dance Workshop** at YMCA offering two sections, ages 6-8 will meet from 12:30 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. and ages 9-13 from 2:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. beginning July 16 and ending August 2.

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### Morris Museum Events :

July 17th Children's Play "Pinocchio" presented by the Yates Musical Theatre, 11 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. in the museum's Bickford Theatre.

July 17th Story Time for children ages 3-6, 10:30 a.m., 11:30 a.m. and 12:30 a.m.

\* \* \* \* \*

**"The Ant and the Grasshopper"** presented by the Townsquare Playhouse, Church and Wall Streets, Rockaway. Matinee performances July 17-20, 24-28, 7 p.m. performances July 22, 27, 28. Call 361-5235 for ticket and matinee times.

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**Ninth Summerfest Concert Announced** at Tourne Park in Boonton Township Wed., July 18 6:30-8:30 p.m. Grover Kemble & Blow Daddy O. Call 326-7600 in case of rain.

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