

OPENING IN JERSEY

Superb 'Lady Day' actress puts audience under the spell of jazz great Billie Holiday

By BOB CAMPBELL

Loretta Devine gives a sensational rendition of jazz goddess Billie Holiday in "Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill." A repeat of her smash hit stint at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre, Devine's Holiday is the finest theater performance currently on view on this shore of the Hudson.

Devine is simultaneously giddy, coquettish, bitter, heartbreaking and hilarious as she enacts one of "Lady Day's" last appearances in a South Philadelphia club in the '50s, some time after her prison term for heroin possession and shortly before her death. Devine is a dazzling actress, and a strong enough singer to fill the vast Memorial Hall with gusts of pure feeling.

Lanie Robertson's musical drama skirts foul-mouthed soap opera as the drunk, and eventually drugged, Holiday interrupts her agreed-upon song list with a woozy, ribald, free-associating trip through romantic betrayals, racial wounds and showbiz asides. Hiding behind a bullet-proof smile, Holiday drifts through memories as hazy as this smoke-filled club, while her patient accompanist tries to steer her back to reality.

Funny, bawdy, frightened and vulnerable, Billie is a grand opportunity for an actress, and the imposing Devine (from Broadway's "Dream Girls") takes glorious advantage. Weaving regally in a white satin dress, she extracts a bittersweet grandeur from the role.

Her warm voice curls insinuatingly around the show's symbolic theme, "Don't Explain." She lovingly unfurls Holiday classics like "God Bless the Child" and "Ain't Nobody's Business" and sounds an even stronger echo of Bessie Smith in "Pig's Feet (and a Bottle of Beer)."

Differentiating herself from blues singer Smith, Billy says that she sings "the blues feeling with the jazz beat." It's exactly this combination of ruefulness and high spirits that gives "Lady Day" its special kick.

Holiday's raw, mincing, uninhibited voice could squeeze the sweetness from a lyric like perfume from one of her trademark gardenias. She could infuse a lyric line with a wild, skidding, witty spontaneity that's the essence of jazz. Devine has a more rounded, well-groomed voice—she suggests the po-



Photo by Jennifer A. Huiszler

Loretta Devine as Billie Holiday in the TheatreFest production of 'Lady Day' at Montclair State College

luter jazz lilt of an Ella Fitzgerald—but she's a powerful enough actress to convey the delicate, desolate beauty of "a dead person singing."

Her piercing sweetness makes you want to cry and clap your hands at the same time.

Will Robertson's production was originally designed for an intimate space at the Old Globe, and it's been hastily but effectively revamped for TheatreFest's sprawling auditorium at Montclair State.

Some audience members are seated at onstage tables, to create the closed-in intensity of Emerson's Bar and Grill (these theatergoers pay half price). Devine uses this supposed audience as her co-stars, while—by gliding out onto a gangplank-like stage extension—she also draws patrons from the auditorium's 1,000 seats into her spell.

Devine finesses this awkwardly bifurcated space because she's the kind of superbly trained actress who can glide from a Broadway belt to a cabaret murmur, from a roar to a whimper, in the blink of one mascara-ed eye. She can command this entire hall with one of her sky-high eyebrows.

Standing on a podium in a shaft of red light, pouring out the searing "Strange Fruit," she's a jazz Joan of Arc singing through the flames. She brings the audience to its feet.

Musical director/accompanist Rahn Coleman and local saxophonist Bradford Hayes lay down a solid jazz backing (unfortunately, the macabre interpolation of the Eisenhower-era anthem "I Believe" is missing). Jeffrey Wingfield's silent authority as a weary bartender contributes as much as a full-scale characterization.

The production has its shortfalls. Hardcore Holiday fans will miss the singer's plaintive, inimitable squeak. Devine's smashing performance lacks the emotional nakedness, eerily detailed mental states and uncanny approximation of Holiday's voice (and spirit) that Edythe Jason achieved in Bette Howard's 1988 production at New Brunswick's Crossroads Theatre.

Devine's Holiday is more polished and gracious and larger than life. She's gleaming and regal, like a dethroned queen. She's a Hecuba in South Philly, and she makes a royal evening out of "Lady Day."