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Entertainment XML

Posted on Thu, Oct. 20, 2005

Story, singing of Ethel Waters proves stirring

KAY PRUDEN
 Special to The Herald

If you go

What: Ethel Waters "His Eye is on the Sparrow"

When: Now through Dec. 2. Performances at 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, matinees at 2 p.m. Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays

Where: Keating Theatre, Florida Studio Theatre, 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota

Tickets: \$32-\$34

Information: 366-9000

The standing ovation that Jannie Jones received at the end of her performance as Ethel Waters left no one in the audience sitting down. A few had tears slipping down their faces.

This is a one-woman and one-man show because Michael Sebastian, the music director and arranger, is on stage playing the piano with heart and fire throughout the entire time. Chaundra Cameron and Jannie Jones alternate performances in the role of Ethel Waters. Consequently, I can only speak about the one I saw and Jones was fantastic.

Ethel Waters' life began when her mother was raped at the age of 12. She constantly refers to herself as a bastard. That and the abject poverty that surrounded her young years influenced her throughout her life, but her vibrant, earthy, blues-infused voice brought her fame and stardom. She was known for her impeccable diction and the clarity of her voice. Jones captured all this. She's a veteran of Carnegie Hall, Madison Square Garden and Radio City Music Hall and a recording star. That will come as no surprise once you see the show.

The show begins and ends with the latter part of Water's life, when she sings with Billy Graham. She's dressed in a blue choir gown and a huge blue hat. "In the Eye of the Sparrow" is the first hint of the wonderful voice we hear for the next two hours. "Black and Blue" is one of the songs that could bring tears to your eyes. Some of the others will set your feet tapping.

The stage has gauze draperies on either side. Alan Mack has backlit them and they change colors with the moods. Michael Sebastian and his piano are on the right. A dressing room area is to the left. At the center, on different levels, are dining room chairs. One lacks arms. Jannie

Jones gives these chairs different personalities in vignettes throughout the evening. Sometimes they are someone she's talking to and sometimes they are something more, such as the scene of an accident. Everything she turns them into is utterly believable.

Jones ages from 13 to somewhere in her 70s. She shakes, shimmies, sashays, struts and, at a later age, she plods and slumps. She goes from young teen married at 13 and divorced at 14 to a sexy siren who bumps and grinds her way through vaudeville, to a star nominated for an Academy Award and finally to an overweight old woman.

Costumes are changed on stage, accomplished with quick, small changes. Hair styles change the same way. You'll see her gain 100 pounds and then another 100 right before your eyes. Jones then sits down in one of those chairs (the armless one) with her legs splayed and arms wide out in the manner of any very overweight person. Recalling her short time in a Catholic school, she speaks of another holy trinity: donuts, pig foot and apple pie.

Her emotions run the gamut from hate to love to terror to loss and unfortunately not too much joy, except perhaps when she was actually performing. There is much sadness in "Stormy Weather," said to encompass what her life was really like. Jones often seemed to have a chip on her shoulder and she learned to put herself first. She fights racism, near death in an accident as whites refuse to help, she learns the only one she can depend on is herself and in the end she learns that she, too, might have been a racist. All these emotions are portrayed starkly, barely in front of us thanks to the artistic skill of Jannie Jones.

Scenic designer Nayna Ramey did a great job of making significant differences with minimal changes. Costume designer Marcella Beckwith did wonders with the costume changes that only take seconds to accomplish and are never out of sight. Production stage manager Stacy A. Blackburn and director and choreographer Dennis Courtney helped make the fantastic show it is. So few people to make so great a show and none of it would have been possible without the great mind of playwright Larry Parr.

Should you see it? Don't miss it! Your emotions are going to run the gamut, too.

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