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CRITICOPIA REGIONAL THEATER

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Show Title	Ethel Waters
Subtitle	His Eye is on the Sparrow
Total Rating	***
Currently Running?	NO
Dates	Opened October 7, 2005; Ended December 2, 2005; ReOpens April 13, 2006; Ended April 16, 2006.
Country	USA
State	Florida
City/Town	Sarasota
Theater Type	Regional
Producer/Theater Co.	Florida Studio Theater (Richard Hopkins, artistic dir)
Theater	Florida Studio Theater - Keating Mainstage
Theater Address	1241 North Palm Avenue
Box Office Phone	(941) 366-9000
Running Time	2 hrs, 15 min
Genre	Solo
Author	Book: Larry Parr; Score: various
Director	Dennis Courtney

Director Dennis Courtney

Review What a journey Ethel Waters took in life! From a bastard black childhood in Philadelphia's Whores' Alley to stardom as a singer and actress of stage and screen, and finally to crusading with Billy Graham as a partner in faith, the trek exacted a toll. As if mirroring how hard Ethel Waters had it physically as well as emotionally, to embody her Jannie Jones alternates with another singer-actress. Judging from her unflagging energy here — and remembering how well she recreated Alberta Hunter all by her lonesome on this same stage — I'd say she deserves a letup but probably doesn't need it. No matter how much mistreatment she must show Ethel had to endure, Jannie brings out her inherent dignity. And that's what she draws on whenever Ethel encountered ugliness, as well as when she responded in kind.

Larry Parr typically structures his musical narrative with a scene toward the end of Ethel's life and then flashes back chronologically to her childhood, unloved by a mother who favored her lighter-skinned half-sister, too poor to be able to continue in the Catholic school she loved, marked by her impoverished and low-life milieu. Being pawned off at 13 to a cheating, beating, "nasty" husband skewered her attitude toward sex and marriage. Fortune smiled only when she got work singing — vaudeville at first. In Harlem, she was responsible for "This Joint Is Jumpin'," starring as Sweet Mama Stringbean.

Every success on stage (and later in films), though, seemed to meet with a blow, usually connected with racism, in the real world. An auto accident, for instance, not only almost cost her a leg; she was arrested on suspicion of having stolen the car from its white owner. No wonder, too, that feelings of unworthiness and rejection from her early life spilled into her marriage with her second husband, bandleader Eddie. Jannie Jones makes clear Ethel's "Taking a Chance on Love" seemed a happy choice but was doomed by her inner conflict. Desires for being alongside Eddie and starting a loving family were at odds with her relentless pursuits to advance her career. "Am I Blue?" and "Stormy Weather" take on special poignancy in this context.

The best in a series of Marcella Beckworth's clever costumes enables Jannie to transition into Ethel's period of morbid obesity. Quite a change from her legitimate theater emulation, in *As Thousands Cheer*, of Josephine Baker doing "Heat Wave." Her growing weight is well documented in films from "Cabin in the Sky" through "Pinky," which she hated, though it got her nominated for an Oscar. It's a tribute to Jannie that she keeps audience sympathy for Ethel, even as Waters insisted on all the trappings of being a star, competing with colleagues and displacing a little

competing with colleagues and displaying a true racism of her own. Billy Graham's insistence for many years on having Ethel join him finally paid off so that "Black and Blue" were the colors of her skin and singer's robe, not a description of her feelings. Imagine the notes soaring finally from Jannie's Ethel, again a child but this time in God's family. "His Eye is on the Sparrow" in the end as in the beginning. If Jannie Jones' performance elevates Larry Parr's narrative, right up on a high plane with her is Michael Sebastian on the piano. Without a word, his playing and posture speak volumes of emotion. The music is not merely well chosen; it seems necessary.

Caution/Guidance	adult themes
Other Critics	LONGBOAT OBSERVER Marty Fugate !
Miscellaneous	The play and this world premier production were commissioned by and developed at FST.
Awards	
Cast	Jannie Jones (alternates with Chaundra Cameron); Michael Sebastian (Pianist)
Technical Staff	Set: Nayna Ramey; Costumes: Marcella Beckwith; Lights: Allen L. Mack
Critic	Kilker, Marie J.
Date Reviewed	October 2005