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Emotional 'Waters' runs deep

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Although she was once hailed as the greatest star of her race and generation, Ethel Waters is hardly a household name today.

More people may come to know her through Larry Parr's new one-woman play with music, "Ethel Waters: His Eye is on the Sparrow" at Florida Studio Theatre.

As he did in previous shows about actress Hattie McDaniel and singer Alberta Hunter, the Sarasota playwright tells a dramatic and often painful story about a woman who triumphs over great adversity.

Songs from her career are woven into the narrative, providing added emotional resonance to the highs and lows in her life that ended in 1977 when she was singing with the Billy Graham crusade.

We don't always know enough about some of the people to feel much about them, and there are scenes where the script forces its way to a song cue. But it mostly fits naturally.

Waters was born in 1896 to a 12-year-old rape victim, and her mother was more like a troubled sister who couldn't provide food or comfort. She was mostly raised by a grandmother who worked hard to ensure that Ethel had a better life.

Those harsh beginnings led Waters to think of herself as a bastard child from a whore's alley in Philadelphia, and that her dark skin made her feel doubly second-class to lighter-skinned black women. She also never trusted white people, who made money off her. An Academy Award nomination for "Pinky" fueled that feeling because "Some white woman won," she says.

While she found success in nightclubs, movies and Broadway, love eluded her. She was married at 13 and divorced by 14. She married again as an adult to musician Eddie Mallory, who couldn't stand how she put her career before him.

Actresses Jannie Jones and Chaundra Cameron are alternating in the demanding role. Audiences won't be cheated with either one, although they will share different experiences under the well-paced direction of Dennis Courtney.

Jones is the stronger singer, bringing a passion and exuberance to a wide-range of songs, although you would be hard-pressed to top Cameron's soul-stirring version of the title gospel tune at the show's end.

In song, Jones makes you feel the joy in Ethel's happy moments, particularly during "Taking a Chance on Love" after she's met Mallory or during "Old Man Harlem," sung after a particularly

Theater review

Ethel Waters: His Eye is on the Sparrow

By Larry Parr. Directed by Dennis Courtney. Reviewed Oct. 7 and 8 at Florida Studio Theatre, 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota. Through Dec. 2. Tickets are \$32 to \$34. Call 366-9000.

harrowing experience in Georgia. And you share her guttural pain during a powerful "Stormy Weather."

Cameron is the stronger actress, finding all the humor and hurt without making it seem melodramatic. Her voice soars when it's allowed to rise above what sounds like a flat lower register.

What doesn't change from night to night is the flourish and style that musical director Michael Sebastian brings to the show. He has written the lively arrangements and the underscoring that provides an engaging background to the spoken scenes. He's clearly working as hard as the two stars.

Marcella Beckwith's costumes capture the range in Waters' life, from her impoverished childhood to her more colorful years as a star of nightclubs, stage and screen.

Nayna Ramey's set effectively uses plain wooden chairs and tables to establish different locales in Waters' life. They are given greater detail and focus through the projections in Allen L. Mack's lighting design.

The suggestiveness of the sets and lighting allows the two performers to bring their own life to the character, as we watch her struggle with her personal demons until she can find some joy in a life that brought happiness to the millions who saw her perform.

