



His Eye is on the Sparrow, Musical Bio of Ethel Waters, Premieres in Florida Oct. 7

By [Kenneth Jones](#)
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Ethel Waters: His Eye is on the Sparrow, a new "musical biography" about the late actress and singer Ethel Waters, gets its world premiere at Florida Studio Theatre in Sarasota Oct. 7.

Larry Parr penned the work, borrowing the title from Waters' autobiography and from the spiritual song of the same name.

Michael Sebastian is musical director, Dennis Courtney directs. The solo show features one of two actresses at each performance — Jannie Jones or Chaundra Cameron.

"Born in 1896 to a teenage rape victim, Ethel Waters began her life in abject poverty, growing up in the slums of Philadelphia and the surrounding area," according to production notes. "She never lived in one place for more than a few weeks at a time."

Waters was blessed, however, with a singing voice, and would work her way through the black vaudeville circuit to Broadway and into Hollywood. She was known as a singer of jazz, blues and show music, but also for her strong Christian faith — she sang spirituals and gospel on tour with Billy Graham.

Less earthy and bluesy than songbirds Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, Waters was considered a sort of refined bridge between those singers and Ethel Waters and Lena Horne.

Songs associated with Waters include "Taking a Chance on Love," "Stormy Weather," "Harlem on My Mind," "Dinah," "Heat Wave," "Sweet Georgia Brown," and "St. Louis Blues."

Her Broadway credits included *As Thousands Cheer*, *At Home Abroad*, *Cabin in the Sky* and the Carson McCullers play, *The Member of the Wedding*. She was in the film versions of both *Cabin in the Sky* and *The Member of the Wedding*.

She was Academy Award nominated for her work in the 1949 film "Pinky."

In 1953, she appeared in a Broadway solo specialty show, *At Home With Ethel Waters*.

Larry Parr, author of *Ethel Waters: His Eye is on the Sparrow*, is a Sarasota resident. Parr's plays have been produced in regional theatres, earning him a number of awards and honors. *Hi-Hat-Hattie*, his musical biography of Hattie McDaniel, won Kansas

City's Drama Desk Award for Best Musical and the American Cinema Foundation awarded him their first prize for the screenplay version.

Parr has twice won the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theater's Annual Play Competition with *My Castle's Rockin'* (a musical biography of Alberta Hunter) and *Sundew* (which was produced by FST in Summer 2005). In 1995, he became the first white playwright produced in the history of the National Black Theatre Festival with the production of *My Castle's Rockin'*.

Jannie Jones returns to FST after appearing in last year's Mainstage opener *It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues*, will appear as Waters in the new work. Jones originated the role of Alberta Hunter in Parr's *My Castle's Rockin'*.

Chaundra Cameron, who has appeared in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* at The Source Theater, *Crowns* at St. Louis Rep and the Cincinnati Playhouse, and *Sophisticated Ladies* at Pioneer Theatre, plays Ethel at some performances.

"[When audiences] come and see the show, they will see Jannie or Chaundra, putting their unique take on the role," director Courtney said in production notes. "An understudy is required to emulate the main actor's performance. But when you see *Ethel Waters* you will see Jannie's take or Chaundra's take. So, returning audiences will have the opportunity to see a different show the second time."

While Jones and Cameron resemble each other enough to be mistaken for sisters, according to FST, "they are definitely two individual women, each with a different voice, style, and presence onstage."

"This show has two scores," musical director Michael Sebastian said in notes. "Each score had to be right for the individual actress."

Every show has the same songs — but in two different keys.

Ethel Waters: His Eye is on the Sparrow was featured as a staged reading in FST's Florida Playwrights Festival in 2002. The reading was directed by Dennis Courtney, returns to direct the premiere.

Performances continue to Dec. 3. *Ethel Waters: His Eye is on the Sparrow* is presented at FST's Keating Theatre. For more information, call (941) 366-9000 or visit www.fst2000.org.

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Known as Sarasota's Contemporary Theatre, Florida Studio Theatre was founded in 1973 by Jon Spelman. Starting out as a small touring company, FST traveled to places such as migrant camps and prisons. The company eventually settled down into a permanent home, acquiring the former Woman's Club building — now renamed the Keating Theatre. In the years that followed, Florida Studio Theatre grew to present in its three

theatre venues: the Keating Theatre, the Goldstein Cabaret and its newest space, the Gompertz Theatre.

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