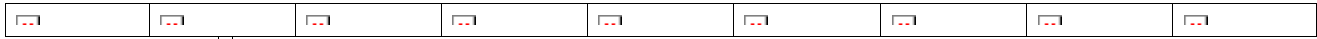


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Even Parr

Playwright Larry Parr keeps his eye on Ethel Waters.

By Mark E. Leib
Published October 19, 2005

Sarasota resident Larry Parr is one of the most successful playwrights on the west coast of Florida. He's been produced in regional theaters all over the United States, has won award after award from the National Arts Club, the American Cinema Foundation (for a screenplay based on one of his plays), the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theater, and several other organizations.

In 1995, he became the first white playwright to have a play produced at the National Black Theatre Festival, and in 2000 he won Florida Studio Theatre's Barbara Anton Playwriting Award. Only a few months ago, his play *Sundew* was presented at FST, and now *Ethel Waters: His Eye Is On The Sparrow* has opened at FST's Keating Mainstage. Parr is prolific and abundantly talented (though I admit I didn't much care for *Sundew*). He knows how to hold an audience's attention for two hours.

He also specializes in an unlikely subject: the lives of celebrated African-American female entertainers. His first play, *Hi-Hat-Hattie*, was about Hattie McDaniel, the first black woman to win an Academy Award. The play premiered at FST in 1991, then went on to more than 20 productions around the country. Five years later, Parr's subject was blues singer Alberta Hunter, and the play was titled *My Castle's Rockin'* - it debuted at FST's Cabaret before going on to win awards and more productions.

After FST artistic director Richard Hopkins asked Parr to write about *Ethel Waters* - and after two New York producers promised to option the show, along with its predecessors - Parr found himself the author, unexpectedly, of a trilogy. But this time his subject was the most improbable of all, having risen from almost unthinkable poverty - as the daughter of a teenage rape victim - to great fame on Broadway and in Hollywood. Hearing of his latest project, a theatergoer might have logically wondered if Parr could tell the tale without sentimentality or facile moralism. Waters might be famous for her rendition of "Stormy Weather," but a play about her might get stuck on "Am I Blue?"

Well, Parr beat the odds. *His Eye Is On The Sparrow* is a delightful, persuasive introduction to Waters' life that never gets mawkish, and that repeatedly surprises with just the right unexpected detail. As portrayed by the



STRONG IN SONG: Chandra Cameron's voice is so strong it doesn't matter where you sit. (Forrest MacDonald)

Ethel Waters: His Eye Is On The Sparrow
Florida Studio Theatre,
1241 N. Palm Ave.,
Sarasota, 366-9000.
Runs through Dec. 2. 8 p.m. Tues.-Sun., 5 p.m. Sat. and 3 p.m. Sun. \$32-\$34.

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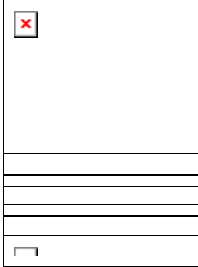
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formidable Chaundra Cameron (who alternates performances with Jannie Jones), this Waters is sassy, stubborn, at times insensitive, distrustful of all whites, stunned by her own success, and convinced that, after all, God must be black.

As in so many one-person shows based on the life of a singer, autobiography is mixed with performances of key anthems; but this time, fortunately, the songs aren't so numerous that they make the monologue seem an afterthought. There are several familiar tunes, though: "Frankie and Johnny," "Sweet Georgia Brown," "We're Havin' a Heat Wave," and "Black and Blue," among others. And Cameron's voice is just fine, though she puts so much emotion into "Stormy Weather" that she almost blows the poor, defenseless notes off the staff.

She also has the benefit of Marcella Beckwith's eloquent costumes, from the sorriest-looking smock that a street urchin ever put on, to the gaudy glitter of a highly paid phenom. And Cameron is a skillful actor, switching from anger to tears to somber reflection in just a few seconds without ever losing our credulity or appearing inauthentic. She's painfully touching when embracing the mother of a lynching victim, amusing when opining that Billy Graham is too good looking to be trusted, and poignant when, hundreds of pounds over her youthful weight, she admits that her Holy Trinity consists of donuts, pig feet and apple pie.

But the one segment of the play that stands out most is her early memory of a car crash that almost cost her a leg, and of the bigotry that left her with a doctor who wouldn't give anesthetic to a black woman. It's hard to know which hurts most: watching her endure the doctor's probing, or being reminded of a South that was once so sadistic to its black citizens.

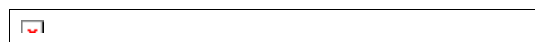
The play's excellent director and choreographer is Dennis Courtney, and the terrific pianist on stage throughout the show is music director/arranger Michael Sebastian. Nayna Ramey's set is an attractive multi-leveled affair, with some colorful, billowing sail-like elements and a bunch of wooden chairs.

Let me mention here that Cameron's voice is so powerful, it doesn't really matter where you sit; I was in the next-to-last row, and didn't miss a single E-flat. And oh yeah, it's nice that at play's end, when Waters becomes a singer on the Billy Graham Crusade, author Parr makes no apologies for the evangelist or for religion. He lets Waters belt out the show's title song with every bit as much sincerity as she gave to "This Joint is Jumpin'." Breaking all modernist rules of knee-jerk iconoclasm, Parr even paints Graham as a good guy, and an anti-racist (see enough theater and you'll eventually see everything).

This show is worth seeing. I've witnessed a lot of these one-person bioplays - about Dorothy Parker, Diana Vreeland, Noel Coward, Theodore Roosevelt, Salvador Dali and others - and this is easily one of the best. In an area without many serious playwrights, it's a pleasure to discover Parr operating at the top of his game. And it's a pleasure to learn the Ethel Waters story this way: lots of facts, several entertaining songs, and a notable respect for the truth, however inconvenient or unlikely.

Good work, Larry Parr. Keep growing - and writing.

And we'll keep our eyes on one of this area's most skillful authors.



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