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Regional

Posted: Sun., Oct. 16, 2005, 6:00am PT

Ethel Waters: His Eye Is on the Sparrow

(Florida Studio Theater, Sarasota, Fla.; 173 seats \$34 top)

A Florida Studio Theater production of a musical in two acts by Larry Parr. Directed and choreographed by Dennis Courtney. Musical director and arranger, Michael Sebastian.

Ethel Waters - ... Jannie Jones/Chaundra Cameron

By **JAY HANDELMAN**

With all the drama and adversity in her life, it's a wonder that Ethel Waters has not been the subject of a biographical play, musical or film before now. While screen treatment might more specifically capture the details of a complex personality and amazing talent, Larry Parr gets the essence in his one-woman play with music, "Ethel Waters: His Eye Is on the Sparrow."

The new work completes his trilogy of one-person shows about famous black performers that began in 1991 with "Hi-Hat Hattie," about Hattie McDaniel, and continued in 1996 with "My Castle's Rockin'," about singer Alberta Hunter.

His newest show is the smoothest and most moving of the three as it relates Waters' hard-scrabble beginnings in 1896 as the daughter of a 12-year-old rape victim who became an alcoholic and was essentially incapable of raising a child. In her early years on what she calls a whore's alley in Philadelphia, Waters regularly stole food, milk and money, sleeping on heating grates to keep warm in winter.

As a child, Waters' biggest dream was to be like her grandmother and clean homes for rich white women. She had no idea that life would take her so much further, as an Oscar-nominated actress (for "Pinky"), a star of Broadway plays and musicals and a singer who became popular around the world. Though Parr doesn't mention her TV series "Beulah," Waters spent her final years singing with the Billy Graham Crusade before her death in 1977.

As in his earlier shows, Parr for the most part effectively interweaves songs from Waters' career at appropriate moments to accentuate a thought or emotional tone. After meeting her second husband, musician Eddie Mallory, she sings "Taking a Chance on Love." "Stormy Weather" follows his decision to seek a divorce because she focused on her career rather than their marriage.

The show is demanding for any performer, and Florida Studio Theater has cast Jannie Jones and Chaundra Cameron as co-equal stars who alternate in the role.

They're both dynamic performers, but with different strengths. Jones is the better singer, while Cameron more effectively captures the humor and drama in the script, giving life to even the most forced monologues.

There are times when the dialogue seems too eager to set up a song cue and others when the audience doesn't get to know enough about someone in Waters' life to share her feelings. Waters may break down in tears, but the audience is left in the cold. That's particularly true with the

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THE GORGEOUS 100

THE BEST MOMENTS IN MUSIC

To celebrate Variety's Centennial, Variety.com presents its list of the most gorgeous film music. Come back each week as we count down our picks for these scores, soundtracks and songs.

80. PURPLE RAIN
79. TOP HAT
78. THE VIRGIN SUICIDES
77. TRAINSPOTTING
76. NEXT STOP WONDERLAND
75. BADLANDS
74. THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM
73. WEST SIDE STORY
72. CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON
71. BARAKA

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 > VIEW THE BEST OF AWARDS FASHION

All of our musical selections had to first satisfy the criteria of "Is it gorgeous?" To that end, we selected a mix of film scores, soundtracks and individual songs taken from movies. Next, the music had to excel, either musically or culturally and ideally both. The ideal candidates for this list resonate in a wider cultural context, recognizable even if one hasn't seen the film.

Don't agree with our choices? Tell us what you think at [Variety Discussions](#).

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LA 411

details about Mallory, who comes and goes too quickly.

There's a joyous quality to Jones' voice, and she brings out a passionate feeling in the more dramatic numbers, particularly "Black and Blue" and "Stormy Weather," that Cameron misses. But Cameron really puts the gospel fervor into the finale of "His Eye Is on the Sparrow."

Michael Sebastian's arrangements are alternately bouncy and poignant, interrupted on many occasions for more storytelling between verses. He also provides a proficient underscoring that gives the show a more cinematic quality.

That's also how director Dennis Courtney has staged the piece, aided by simple wooden set pieces and a lighting design that uses clear focus and projections to easily shift the scene from a run-down apartment to a Harlem nightclub, a Catholic school or a movie set. Costuming also creates images of the changes in Waters' life.

The idea of a theater producing all three shows in repertory or successive stagings is intriguing, but even alone, Waters' life is worth rediscovering.

Sets, Nayna Ramey; costumes, Marcella Beckwith; lighting, Allen L. Mack; production stage manager, Stacy A. Blackburn. Opened Oct. 7, 2005. Reviewed Oct. 7 and 8. Running time: **2 HOURS, 10 MIN.** Musical numbers: "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," "Masculine Men, Feminine Women," "Frankie and Johnny," "I Don't Dig You, Jack," "Sweet Georgia Brown," "The Joint Is Jumpin'," "Little Black Boy," "Old Man Harlem," "Dinah," "Taking a Chance on Love," "Am I Blue?," "Stormy Weather," "Heat Wave," "Cabin in the Sky," "Black and Blue," "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" (reprise).

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BOX OFFICE TOP TEN

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Weekend estimate: Oct. 14 - Oct. 16, 2005 * in millions

1	The Fog	\$12.2	6	Domino	\$4.7
2	Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit	\$11.7	7	Two for the Money	\$4.6
3	 Elizabethtown	\$11.0	8	A History of Violence	\$3.6
4	Flightplan	\$6.5	9	Tim Burton's Corpse Bride	\$3.5
5	In Her Shoes	\$6.1	10	Waiting ...	\$2.9

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