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POP/JAZZ

In 1940's Harlem, Even Shakespeare Learns to Swing

By BARRY SINGER

I REMEMBER HIM BEING THE most stylish and elegant man I'd ever seen in my life. Not just the music. I'd never seen a man better dressed; who spoke so beautifully -- his idiosyncratic use of language. And he was charming beyond measure. I wanted a show that he would be proud of."

The speaker, the 44-year-old stage director Sheldon Epps, remembers Duke Ellington vividly, though he saw the great orchestra leader and composer perform only once before Ellington's death in 1974. As a result, this Thursday at the Brooks Atkinson Theater, Duke Ellington will return to Broadway -- a circumstance he longed for but never actually realized in his own lifetime. "Play On!" is a homage to Ellington's memory, conceived and mounted by Mr. Epps with ambitions that are truly Ellingtonian.

No mere song parade, "Play On!" re-tells Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" as a traditional book musical transported to 1940's Harlem using a score of 22 classic and obscure compositions by Ellington and his alter ego and collaborator, Billy Strayhorn.

It is in no way dishonorable to point out that Duke Ellington was an ambitious man. For nearly half a century, Ellington pursued a rare creative odyssey through American culture. But the journey driven by his genius, riding the engine of his orchestra, was navigated right to the end by unquenchable ambition.

Mr. Epps, best known for conceiving and directing "Blues in the Night," a blues musical revue on Broadway in 1983, first planned to stage the Shakespeare play straight, with an incidental score of Ellington songs, at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego, where Mr. Epps was an associate artist in residence in 1993. Gradually it occurred to him, though, to refurbish "Twelfth Night" as a Harlem fantasy, with the Ellington songs centrally deployed to advance the plot and develop character.

"There is a natural parallel," he said recently, "between the upstairs-downstairs nature of Shakespeare's play and Ellington's music. Ellington wrote songs that were both 'high' and 'low,' in the same sense that Shakespeare defines his characters in 'Twelfth Night' in terms of high and low language and antics. Putting the two together just seemed a fine thing to do."

Beginning with his own 10-page treatment that plugged the music into a storyline set in "the magical kingdom of Harlem" during "the swingin' 40's," Mr. Epps eventually brought in the playwright Cheryl L. West to write the formal script.

Ms. West, whose works include the 1994 "Holiday Heart," found that "those themes that define 'Twelfth Night' travel incredibly well to the 20th century: love as illusion; loving only what you see in someone -- the surface; loving your mirror image." The music, she said, "took me straight back to my grandmother's house. I've never had so much fun writing anything in my life."

"Play On!" had its debut in San Diego in September, and the positive reviews were the kind that boot regional successes toward Broadway. Audiences were particularly taken by the clever crossbreeding of Shakespeare's characters with Ellington's uptown universe. Viola was now Vy, an aspiring songwriter from "down home" in the South, so desperate to crack Harlem's rigidly male songwriting fraternity that she opts to pass herself off as one of the guys -- a far better pretext for the play's central cross-dressing conceit than any actually supplied in "Twelfth Night."

Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, had become simply Duke, an Ellington-like bandleader whom Vy yearns to meet and soon learns to love, while the Countess Olivia, as the object of the Duke's affection, had been transformed into Lady Liv, a Harlem nightclub diva. Malvolio, much abused steward to Olivia, and Viola's brother, Sebastian, destined lover to Olivia by default, were synthesized into Rev, Lady Liv's adoring, uptight manager.

"I wanted our Harlem to be a very nonrealistic, magical place, an Illyria, where music in the air would make things happen," Mr. Epps said. As a result, "Play On!" avoids specificity scenically with a design (the work of James Leonard Joy) inspired by the brilliantly colored collages of the artist Romare Bearden, Ellington's friend and colleague. The script also fudges historical authenticity by focusing on the Cotton Club as the site for much of the dramatic action, even though the Harlem club closed its doors in 1936. But Shakespeare could never be said to have troubled himself much about historical veracity either.

For all of its invention and reinvention, "Play On!" must answer one fundamental question: How well served are the songs? The cast is strong on Broadway veterans and includes Carl Anderson (as Duke), who played Judas in the original "Jesus Christ Superstar"; Cheryl Freeman (Vy), the Acid Queen in the Broadway version of "Tommy"; Lawrence Hamilton (Rev), who was in "The Wiz"; Tonya Pinkins (Lady Liv), who won a Tony for "Jelly's Last Jam"; and Larry Marshall ("Hair") and Andre de Shields ("Ain't Misbehavin'"), who offer a take-no-prisoners rendition of the little-known blues "Rocks in My Bed" (credited to Ellington but actually the work of Strayhorn).

The story-telling deployment of Ellington-Strayhorn standards allows listeners to re-examine familiar tunes in unexpected contexts: "I'm Beginning to See the Light," delivered as a hip-shaking howl of liberation by Rev, dressed in a yellow zoot suit, garishly modeled on Malvolio's yellow crossed-garters; "Prelude to a Kiss," offered up by Vy and Duke as they tenderly and at last acknowledge their love. The narrative line also refocuses attention on lyrics that were often written out of context themselves by a hodge-podge of Tin Pan Alley lyricists hired to adapt hit Ellington band instrumentals.

The production is lent further Ellingtonian resonance by its choreographer, Mercedes Ellington, the Duke's granddaughter. Ms. Ellington, who was the assistant choreographer for the 1981 "Sophisticated

Ladies," a revue also based on Ellington songs, said that again with "Play On!," "I really feel the presence of two Ellingtons beside me, the old man and his son, my father, Mercer, who was in the band for so many years and then led it until his own death.

"Actually, I think of them both being more out there," she added. "Still on the road somewhere. That's how they were always present for me anyway."

The vision of Viola as an aspiring songwriter perhaps reflects most on the Ellington history, as it evokes with bittersweet irony the spirit of Billy Strayhorn. While Mr. Epps, the director, readily concedes that the Strayhorn symmetries are entirely unintentional, the eerie light they throw across "Play On!" haunts him.

Back in December 1938, a 23-year-old Strayhorn -- according to legend -- slipped into the Stanley Theater in Pittsburgh and, just like Viola, introduced himself to the Duke as an aspiring songwriter, thereby commencing his own conflicted musical love affair, underscored by "Twelfth Night"-like questions of illusion and identity that echo to this day.

"I often used to think, as I uncovered this Ellington song or that one for the show, that the Duke himself was sometimes leading me to them," said Mr. Epps. "Now, I wonder, though, if maybe it was Billy after all."

Photos: Sheldon Epps, the director, and Cheryl L. West, the book author of "Play On!"; Cheryl Freeman, left, and Tonya Pinkins in the Ellington musical "Play On!" (Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)