'Sty of the Blind Pig' at Arena Playhouse

By Sterling S. Robinson

The opening of the Arena Players production of "Sty of the Blind Pig" was postponed twice last week due to the sudden winter storm which paralyzed thousands of motorists in the Baltimore area. But the few stout-hearted souls who braved the cold weather Saturday night were treated to a heart-warming and thought-provoking performance by an excellent cast.

The three-act-play by Phillip Hayes Dean takes place on the Southside of Chicago in the 50's, just prior to the beginning of the civil rights movement. The Warren's apartment is where the scene is set.

Weedy Warren (Verna Day) is sitting in her rocker one evening when her brother, Doc comes to visit. Weedy is very active in the church and Doc (Ben Prestbury) is just the opposite: a lover, a gambler and bon vivant, resplendent with three-piece-suit, spats, cane and derby hat.

As usual he wants to borrow some money. "What makes you think I've got some money?" says Weedy. "People like you always got money," says Doc, "but you've got to let it roll. It was people like you that stopped rolling the money and brought on the depression."

At this time Weedy's daughter Alberta (Annette Burton) comes home from work to discover that her mother has promised one of the ladies from the church that she would write the obituary for the upcoming funeral this week.

"I don't feel like writing any more obituaries," she says. "But you know nobody can write them like you," counters Weedy. "No, I won't do it," says Alberta. Weedy resigns and then leaves the apartment with Doc. Alberta has second thoughts and begins to write the obituary. Suddenly, she becomes despondent and begins to weep over her Bible.

About a week after the funeral Alberta is at home alone when she hears a knock on the door. The male voice on the other side is inquiring about a woman named Grace Waters. After informing him that Grace doesn't live there he pleads with her to speak with him for a moment. She fastens the chain and then opens the door.

Standing there before her was a blind man. Blind Jordan (Keith Snipes) is a street-singer from New Orleans who is "from a long line of blind, street-singers." He has been going from building to building in the neighborhood knocking on every door trying to find her.

Alberta invites him in and offers to fix him a sandwich and a glass of milk. He repays her by singing for his supper. After a brief conversation he thanks her for her hospitality and goes on about his way.

But not before Alberta offers her assistance. In the coming weeks Alberta and Jordan spend a lot of time together looking for Grace Waters. But she has Weedy thinking that she has been spending her Saturday afternoons at the doctor's office.

Weedy tries to enlist Doc into spying on Alberta. "My own daughter won't tell me what's wrong with her or what doctor she's seeing," says Weedy. "Will you help me?" "Well that depends," says Doc. "On what?" Weedy exclaims. "On how much money you're going to give me," he says.

"But she's your own flesh and blood. Don't you care about her?" "Of course I do, "says Doc. "But espionage, I'm told, is very dangerous work." Alberta comes home and is outraged when Doc tells her what Weedy has in mind. "You better stop it Mama," she says. "You are driving me crazy."

Time passes and now it is early fall. Weedy is preparing for a trip to the annual convocation so she can hear "some of the best preaching in the country." And like so many of us she is trying to squeeze too many clothes into her old suitcase.

In fact she has to remove a few items and still has to sit on it while Alberta locks it. To her dismay, she needs a pair of white stockings that are already packed. Alberta offers to go to the store so Weedy won't have to reopen the case.

While she is gone Blind Jordan comes to the door looking for her. Weedy lets him in and after a brief interrogation accuses him of being the devil. She makes him promise that he won't come around while she is out of town.

A few days later she is looking out the window and sees Jordan walking down the street. She calls down and invites him up. She wonders why he hasn't come around lately and he tells her that he promised her mother. This further angers Alberta. Jordan calms her down and they have a very candid conversation about their respective pasts.

In a very moving and powerful dream sequence, Alberta flashes back to the funeral of Emmanuel Fisher, the only man she had ever loved. Unfortunately, he died in a plane crash before she had a chance to make her love known.

She goes into convulsions as she relives the experience of trying to climb into the casket with him. Jordan has to snap her out of it.

As Act II fades to black, Jordan and Alberta are locked in a very passionate embrace.

The third and final act is the clincher. It ties up all of the loose ends and reveals the true secret of Blind Jordan and the real meaning behind the "Sty of the Blind Pig."

And as such, I'm going to let you go and see it for yourself. The "Sty . . . ." directed by Ben Prestbury with set design by Robert Russell and Byron Rodgers runs every weekend through February at the Arena Playhouse.

ARENA STAGE

In The Arena now through March 13

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Museum celebrates Richard Allen

Washington, DC—In honor of Black History Month, and in conjunction with Anacostia Museum's exhibition on the history of black churches in America, the "American Sampler" series at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History will repeat its popular programs on the life and work of the Rev. Richard Allen during the month of February.

Born a slave in 1760, Richard Allen was one of the founders of the African Methodist Church, the largest independent black church denomination in the United States today. His "Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns," (1801) helped to establish an ongoing hymn-singing tradition in the A.M.E. church.

On Saturday, Feb. 20, from 1 to 4 p.m. in the Hall of Musical Instruments (third floor), the museum will present "The Songs and Times of Richard Allen." The program will begin with introductory remarks by Edward Smith, a historian at Anacostia Museum.

At 1:30 p.m., pianist, vocalist and composer Evelyn Simpson-Curenton will lead a participatory workshop in early A.M.E. worship song. With the assistance of the audience, Simpson-Curenton will explore the roots of early black hymn-singing traditions.

At 3:30 p.m., Washington, D.C., actor Michael W. Howell will perform his original dramatic presentation, "The Times of Richard Allen." His multicharacter theater piece, a collaboration between Howell and Smithsonian staff, tells the story of the Rev. Richard Allen and the founding of the A.M.E. church. The material is based on the biography and writings of Allen and his close associates.

Michael W. Howell

Additional performances of "The Times of Richard Allen" have been scheduled for Thursdays, Feb. 11, 18 and 25, at noon in the museum's Philadelphia Tavern (second floor). (NOTE: The Philadelphia Tavern is part of the museum's permanent installation "After the Revolution: Everyday Life in America 1780-1800," which features sections on African-Americans of the Chesapeake and religion in the new nation, with details about Allen and the birth of the A.M.E. church. There will be a docent-led tour of the exhibition at 4 p.m. on Feb. 20.)

The Anacostia Museum exhibition, titled "Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Rise of Black Churches in Eastern American Cities, 1740-1877," is on view through March 20.

Special performances of "The Times of Richard Allen" for senior citizens and school groups are available in conjunction with the Anacostia Museum. For more information, call (202) 357-3369.

The programs are free and open to the public. Groups are welcome at all events; however, group leaders are encouraged to call (202) 357-4182 in advance to check the availability of seating.

The National Museum of American History, located between 12th and 14th streets on Constitution Avenue, N.W., is open from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is free.

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Restaurant Review

Hazel's is the place to go

By Gina L. White

If you fancy the mouth-watering taste of Southern style cuisine, the smooth flowing sounds of jazz music, and the intimacy of candlelight dining, then Hazel's is definitely the perfect place for you. Just ask District first lady, Effie Barry, or television talk show host Carole Randolph.

Even famed jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie walked away licking his chops after he dropped in for a bite during one of his recent in-town engagements. This unique supper club, which is conveniently located in the heart of the culturally enriched atmosphere of the Adams Morgan district, proudly offers some of the finest down home dishes in the Washington area.

When the restaurant/nightclub first opened its doors ten years ago at 1834 Columbia Road, N.W., it was originally known as The Excalibur. At that time, The Excalibur had every intention of being recognized as a hot bed for the city's jazz lovers. However, it was Hazel William's expert culinary skills and not the musicians that scored big with the patrons.

So, four years ago Henry Williams, the owner, dropped the name The Excalibur and added the name Hazel's in its place. The musicians still perform, and the music is very good — excellent even. But, there's no doubt about it. It's Hazel's charming appeal and fine cooking that keep the folks running back.

Hazel Williams

As Hazel puts it, "We're the only restaurant in Adams Morgan that offers good Southern American soulfood. Most of the other restaurants offer an Ethiopian fare." ANC employee John Jones certainly enjoys the food, "The atmosphere and the people are nice, but the food — especially the chicken wings — is the best."

Freelance editorialist and word-processor Kathleen Wills seconds his emotion, "I live in the neighborhood, and I don't cook. Hazel feeds me — both in a literal sense and in a spiritual sense. It's like family here. Hazel is a wonderful hostess."

Although the moderately-priced menu, which offers an array of dishes ranging from succulent Crab Cakes to tantalizing Bar-B-Q Ribs, is one of the club's most attractive features, some customers prefer to simply relax at the bar while soaking up the musical stylings of the featured artist. As district jazz lover Marion Moat states, "I like to see the older musicians get up and jam. It's like a jam session. The atmosphere is nice, and I really enjoy it."

So, too, says featuring saxophonist Carlos Johnson, "I really enjoy playing here because of the atmosphere and the audience. This is the kind of audience that every musician dreams of playing for." Here, there is a natural unity between the musicians and the audience. The intimate atmosphere of the club enhances the performances and enables the audience to become a part of the musician and to really enjoy the music. In fact, patrons sometimes stand up in the aisles and sing along with the musicians.

The clientele consist mainly of

(Continued on page 12)

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