THEATRE NEWS

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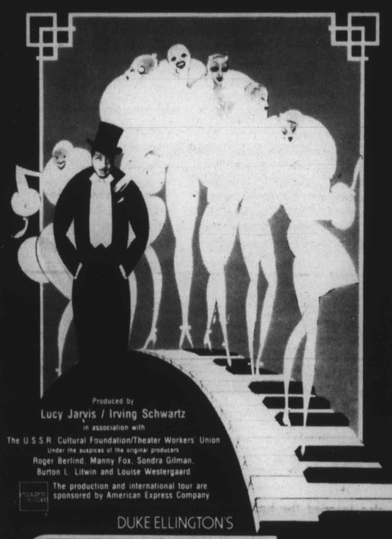

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A Theatre Guild Attraction

Greek classic revamped into modern drama

By S. Monique Craig
Special to the AFRO

The assumption by some people that ancient Greek drama cannot be performed in contemporary theater is misleading.

Although the structure of Greek tragedy grew our of religious ritual and mysticism, and modern theater is by contrast a secular phenomena, the archetypal concepts of Greek drama (man vs. the gods vs. society) can still be understood and appreciated by today's audiences especially when it is well done.

Unfortunately "The Baachae," a contemporary adaptation of Euripides' classic, by the Studio Theatre's Joy Zinman and Maynard Marshall, is not.

The play's central character, a god called Dionysus (played by British actor, Jon Tindle) returns to his native Thebes disguised as a man. His mission is to persuade the city's inhabitants and its King, a lofty unbeliever named Pentheus, that he is a God.

Unfortunately for Pentheus, his unbelief leads him to attempt to imprison Dionysus and is punished with death by the God.

"The Baachae " certainly qualifies as an attempt to bridge the gap between the old and the new — indeed the modern characters, the city's religious leader is an elderly new York Jew and Dionysus is a study of contemporary fashion, are credible portrayed by the lead actors.

However, the play is marred by its lack of continuity and long-winded rhetoric. Its last two scenes describing the details of Dionysus revelries' on a mountain and the destruction of Pentheus are tedious in the extreme.

The audience is bombarded with overdone — both in length and drama — dialogue, and is reprieved only by the spectacle of the severed head of Pentheus impaled on a bloodied pole.

"The Baachae" is not a disastrous work, but neither will it go down in history as a masterpiece, as the classic on which it was based.

The play runs through April 9 at The Studio Theatre. For information call 332-3300.

'Reunion in Bartersville': Only two class members shine

By V. A. Williams

Some comedic scripts are intrinsically so hilarious that they would have theatregoers rolling with laughter even if some characters were not well cast. Even if the actors portraying those characters would render mediocre performances.

Celeste Walker's "Reunion In Bartersville" is such a script. And the actors cast in the Takoma Players' current production of Walker's play fit the description of the actors mentioned above—all but two of them, that is.

Set in 1983, in a small Texas town, "Reunion In Bartersville" is the story of the 50-year reunion of the graduating class of '33. Four of the five surviving members of the class, plus two spouses, gather at the home of a class member to socialize and reminisce about their high school days.

During their celebration, the hostess, Janie Mae Hopper (Lynda S. Balthrop), receives a phone call from the fifth surviving member of the class, A. J. Hamm (Ed Bishop), whom the group thought had died in prison during the time he had served for allegedly killing a member of the senior class fifty years ago.

In their brief phone talk, A. J. informs Janie Mae that he has read about the planned class reunion in the newspaper. Furthermore, he will be there in an hour to join the group of celebrants.

What ensues is a very comical scenario with the six being nervous about A. J.'s impending visit.

A. J. arrives to unravel the mystery of who actually killed the classmate.

The mystery is solved but only after members of the group have a terrific go of verbally attacking each other for past mistakes and exposed secrets—much to A. J.'s delight.

Walker's script would fly even with amateur actors. And this is almost the case, considering the barely adequate performances of Lynda S. Balthrop as Janie Mae, and Ken Grant and Jean Fran as Perry and Liz Roussel.

Robin C. Byrd as Cous Picket (Janie Mae's cousin) is a cut above adequate. In fact, he evokes many laughs from the audience but overacts most of the time.

What causes the play to take off and soar is the work of two exceptional thespians. Janice L. Sanders—in the role of Pollina Davis, a feisty, gaudy, youngish senior citizen, who is the shrewd owner of a string of nightclubs and recently married to a man young enough to be her grandson—is on target with her performance, and she has marvelous comic timing. Sanders shines—brilliantly.

Secondly, Ed Bishop as A. J. Hamm, causes his character to live in a way that few comedic-dramatic characters can. Additionally, Bishop's make-up and movements are remarkable in their aging effects.

Bishop is truly funny and dramatic in all of the appropriate places. He and Sanders are perfectly cast.

The Set Design (Brian Rudolph) is appropriate for the time period in which the play is set and for the taste of Janie Mae, a retired schoolteacher.

Lighting Design (Purcell Conway) is creative but not spectacular.

Costume Design (Andrea L. Hines and Rachel Spaght) and Make-up (Rachel Spaght) are for the most part fair, but wonderful for Pollina Davis and A. J. Hamm.

Music by Greg White is excellent in helping to establish the time period and the nostalgic mood for the reminiscing class reunion members.

"Reunion In Bartersville," directed by Ed Bishop, is running through April 23, at The Takoma Theatre, 6833 Fourth St. N.W. (at Butternut).

ALL THAT JAZZ

By Bob Matthews

Two major concerts on tap for this weekend, with the Left Bank Jazz Society ending its season with a session featuring **Johnny Griffin**, and The Central Pa. Friends of Jazz presenting **Oregon**.

Both happen Sunday, April 16 at 5 p.m. LBJS set will be at the Tawes Center Ballroom of Coppin State College, 2500 W. North Ave., and as usual, it will be BYOB.

With Griffin will be **Michael Wels,** piano; **Dennis Irving**, bass, and **Kenny Washington**, drums. Griffin is no stranger to LBJS, having played for them many times, going back to the days at the Famous.

And, it is a fitting close to the Left Bank's season. They'll go on hiatus after this, returning in the fall.

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CPFOJ will hold its session at the Sheraton Harrisburg East, off Exit 29 of I-83. It will be a bit of a different sort of session, for Oregon is more than just a jazz group.

They are an experimental collection with instrumentation not usually found in this country: Tabla, East Indian drums, bells and cymbals, and all the rest.

Johnny Griffin

Featured will be **Ralph Towner, Paul McCandless, Glen Moore, and Trilok Gurtu.** Have only heard this group on recordings, so have no indication as to the live performance format.

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The **Duke Ellington** birthday celebration continues in D.C., and must say, we caught the opening session featuring violinist **Joe Kennedy** at the American History Museum last Sunday, and was completely knocked out.

Besides the music, there is a display of Ellingtonia on view at the museum, including some of Duke's artifacts. There is also a loop-circuit VCR viewer, which plays videos of Duke and the band.

This Sunday, April 9, the early Big Band Years, 1933-40 highlighting Duke and his collaborators, will be the subject of a presentation featuring pianist **Hilton Felton, Jr** and vocalist **Jimmy McPhall**.

Concert will go on at noon and again at 2 p.m. For those who might not remember, McPhail, a native Washingtonian, sang with the Ellington band for more than 17 years, and sings with the Ellington band headed up by **Mercer Ellington**.

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For those who have queried, the 22nd Annual Hampton Jazz Festival will be held June 23-25 at the Hampton Coliseum.

Friday night will feature **Ray Charles, Grover Washington, Jr., and Dianne Reeves.**

Also on Friday night will be a group of jazz artists being billed as the Ultimate Set. It consists of **Hank Crawford** and **Jimmy McGriff**, along with **David Fathead Newman**, and **Arthur Prysock** and **Lou Donaldson.**

Saturday night is more in the pop vein, with the group **Take Six**, along with the legendary **O'Jays**. Vocalist **Diane Schuur** along with the **Count Basie Orchestra**, headed up by **Frank Foster**.

Rounding the nights entertainment will be the vocal fusion group **Spyro Gyra**.

Sunday showcases **David Sanborn**, guitarist **Larry Carlton**, and what is being called contemporary Christian soul rockers **Bebe and Cece Winans.**

Further information: (804) 838-4203.

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Jazz Expressways, the jazz travel club, will be holding a jazz breakfast Saturday, April 22 at the Five-Mile House (Upper Lounge), 10 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Artists to appear include **Gary Thomas** with his group Seventh Quadrant, featuring **Tim Murphy**, piano; **Drew Gress, bass; and Adrian Green**, drums.

Jazz Expressways is about to embark on a new venture being called Uptown Sunday Night at the Forum, which is set to kick off on May 7. More details later, but we can say that it is scheduled from 7:30-10:30 and will include a buffet.

Haven't had a chance to talk about it with **Lenny Yorke** who heads up the group, but frankly, we kinda hate to see such a proliferation of events geared for Sunday evening.

Imagine what a quandary will be produced when one has to choose between LBJS, CPFOJ, Gentleman 10 and the Forum.

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Dropped into Blues Alley to catch the opening of the **Mark Murphy** stint. The jazz vocalist is in place through April 9. Must say, that he really put on a sterling peformance, with a collage of tunes Miles Davis has done through the years.

Backup group is a familiar one to Baltimoreans, consisting of **Bob Butta**, piano; **Geoff Harper**, bass, and **Steve Williamns**, drums. It all swings to a fare-the-well.

Regina Belle's out of the background and stepping out front

Regina Belle, who grew up with a strong gospel influence to her music will perform along with Final Chapter at Martin's West on Thursday, April 13 starting at 8:30 p.m.

Belle, now 24 years old, grew up in Englewood, New Jersey and was exposed to music at a very early age. Her mother sang soprano (and still does) in the local Friendship Baptist Church choir. Her father sang baritone and led a professional group called the Belle-Tones. "I grew up listening to and loving such gospel acts as Shirley Caesar and Inez Andrews," Regina says.

She also enjoyed rhythm and blues and recalls "getting turned on to the Temptations before I was five. I also remember being absolutely glued to the tv when the Grammys, 'American Bandstand; or 'Soul Train' was on!" Regina's family — her grandfather is a deacon, her uncle a preacher — wanted her to be a gospel singer. So her inclination towards R&B and later, jazz, disappointed them at first, but, "they encouraged me to pursue my music," she adds.

Throughout her school years, she always played in the band. Starting on trombone, Regina switched to baritone and eventually settled down (so to speak) with the tuba. In high school she also learned the basic of steel drums.

Regina Belle

"My first real gig," Regina says, "happened when I was twelve. I sang a tune by the Emotions called "Don't Ask My Neighbors.' It was for a high school concert and I made $25. The tune, by the way, is still one of my favorites. Then I started to get work singing at local fashion shows and at weddings. I eventually joined a group called Private Property and worked a lot with them."

Regina became so busy that, aside from the band, she had no time to go out for school plays and class shows. But she did find time to play on the basketball team as well as in a summer league. She adds, "I still play every chance I get and I follow the teams, especially the Houston Rockets, Atlanta Hawks, and also the L.A. Lakers. Magic Johnson is out of this World!"

Regina got "serious" about her music when she got a scholarship to the preparatory department of the prestigious Manhattan School of Music. She studied voice with Inge Wolfe and recalls, "learning opera was a big challenge, and from Inge I really learned to develop good breath control. She was an outstanding teacher. Up until that time I had no voice lessons."

The Rutgers University music department beckoned Regina after high school graduation and proved a turning point in her musical development. "I became the first jazz vocalist to officially enroll in the program and get to sing with the jazz ensemble," she says.

"Sir William Butler Fielder, who is now program director, jazz piano professor Kenny Baron, and Horace Young, who directed the jazz ensemble, all inspired me and gave me lots of encouragement."

Regina made a few gigs in Greenwich Village during college, but her real "break" came when Vaughn Harper of WBLS recommended her to the Manhattans. They were looking for a female vocalist to join them

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