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## **Theater Review: The power of Billie Holiday lives on**

By Jim Lowe

Staff Writer

No one who experienced Marinda Anderson singing "Strange Fruit, the song about lynching Billie Holiday made famous, Friday at the Dorset Playhouse is likely to forget it.

Anderson is playing Holiday in Dorset Theatre Festival's "Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill," Lanie Robertson's portrait of the jazz great in words and music, which runs through Sept. 3.

Friday's opening night audience was transported to one of the troubled singer's last performances — one that ranged from hilarious to heart-wrenching, but always memorable.

Holiday (1915-1959) was an American jazz musician and singer-songwriter with a career spanning nearly 30 years. Nicknamed Lady Day by her friend and music partner Lester Young, she was considered a major influence by the likes of Frank Sinatra.

But Holiday, with a difficult childhood that included rape and prostitution, was plagued throughout her life with abusive men and drug and alcohol addiction. But, to the last, she fought on.

"Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill" is an imagined performance at is a seedy bar in Philadelphia in 1959, given four months before her death. More than a dozen musical numbers are interlaced with salty, often humorous, reminiscences, revealing the lady and her music, much culled from her autobiography.

That said, the Dorset experience was anything but academic. Anderson became Holiday, and with Kenney M. Green as Jimmy Powers, her pianist and support system, took the audience into the singer's shrinking world. With inspired direction by Dina Janis, Dorset's artistic director, Friday's performance took a few minutes to draw the audience in — to meet Billie Holiday — and, from then on, it was riveting.

Anderson, who had already proved herself a fine actress in Dorset's "Intimate Apparel," turns out to be a particularly fine singer. It took both qualities to sing and act like Holiday and, to the extent that any one can, she did it. Notably, Anderson was able to reflect the singer's increasing dissipation due to alcohol consumption, interrupted with flashes of brilliance. But the songs didn't come across as recreations of Holiday performances; rather Anderson delivered them from the heart.

Green as the exasperated Jimmy proved a fine jazz pianist, and the production's able music director. Alexander Woodward created a realistic club setting, with

appropriate costumes by Tracy Christiansen, illuminated with Michael Giannitti's inspired lighting. Save for being a bit brash, Jane Shaw's sound design for the finale was particularly effective.

But it was "Strange Fruit," written in 1937 by Abe Meeropol (under the pseudonym Allan Lewis), a white Jewish poetry teacher, that made this production transcend the theater. Supported by Green's Jimmy, Anderson's singing, "Southern trees bear a strange fruit/ Blood on the leaves and blood at the root/ Black body swinging in the Southern breeze/ Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees," left the room breathless.

Rather than a downer, it was a tender remembrance of greatness.

### Dorset Theatre Festival

Dorset Theatre Festival presents "Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill," a play with music by Lanie Robertson, Aug. 18-Sept. 3 at the Dorset Playhouse, 104 Cheney Road in Dorset. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday and Wednesday, plus Saturday, Sept. 3. Tickets are \$46-\$60, \$18 for students; call 802-867-2223, or go online to <http://dorsettheatrefestival.org>.

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