

Article published Aug 11, 2016

Lady Day is coming to Dorset

By Jim Lowe

Staff Writer

Dina Janis, Dorset Theatre Festival's artistic director, having come from a family of professional jazz musicians, is ideally suited to direct a show about jazz great Billie Holiday.

“For me she represents a fierce American hero,” Janis says. “Her song (though she didn't write it) ‘Strange Fruit’ (about lynching) is one of the most powerfully impactful anti-discrimination and anti-racism pieces that has ever been written. She was banned from singing it — and never, ever stopped singing it, no matter what the consequences.”

Dorset Theatre Festival will present “Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill,” a play with music by Lanie Robertson, Aug. 18-Sept. 3, at the Dorset Playhouse.



The time is 1959; the place is a seedy bar in Philadelphia. The audience is invited to witness one of Holiday's last performances, 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.

Dorset Playhouse will be transformed into that nightclub. Marinda Anderson is Billie Holiday, and Kenney Green is Jimmy, her pianist and friend.

“It's one of those shows that you have to find your Billie before deciding to go forward and do it,” Janis said in a recent phone interview.

Anderson had played the leading role of the seamstress in Dorset's “Intimate Apparel.”

“I think she's a stunning actress, and found out she's an incredible singer and had done a show as Sarah Vaughan at La MaMa,” Janis said. “She started out her training as a singer. That sealed the deal for me. I think she's a star in the making.”

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 had a seminal influence on jazz music and pop singing.

Frank Sinatra told *Ebony* magazine in 1958, “With few exceptions, every major pop singer in the U.S. during her generation has been touched in some way by her genius. It is Billie Holiday who was, and still remains, the greatest single musical influence on me. Lady Day is unquestionably the most important influence on American popular singing in the last 20 years.”

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 remained her own woman.

“A lot of people get caught up in her personal story, which is very interesting,” Janis said. “But on a musical level, she was very innovative as a singer in the way in which she sang like an instrumentalist, like a musician.

“The musicians who played with her loved her because she did things with her voice phrasing-wise, and when it came to the beat, hanging back on the beat, that were just so musical. Her head was just so in the instrumental back-and-forth with them,” Janis said. “So as a singer she was quite unique.”

With influences like Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and the like, Holiday was also an inspired composer.

“Her signature pieces were her own compositions, and they were also profoundly successful. Her musical impact was just amazing,” Janis said.

Holiday was that, and much more. Without intending to be, she was a pioneer for civil rights.

“She was a black woman who was prominent in a period of time in which Jim Crow and those laws were still extremely severe,” Janis said. “In her early days she traveled throughout the South with bands that were all white except for her, wasn't allowed to come through the front door or use the bathroom, or eat, or couldn't stay at the hotels.

“So she suffered immensely from the kind of endemic racism that was really prominent,” Janis said, adding, “Her story is particularly pertinent now.”

Holiday remains one of America's musical icons.

“She was very strong as a woman, making her own choices,” Janis said. “But she never got over the heroin. She died at 44.”

At 6 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 20, Vermont Public Radio's jazz program host Tom Reney looks at the realities of Billie Holiday's career, what brought her to the Philadelphia bar in 1959 where the play takes place and how the historic context of segregation laws that restricted a generation of America's greatest homegrown musicians impacted her. Admission is free.

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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>.