

Marsalis scales heights in Blood on the Fields tour

By Maketa Groves
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Wynton Marsalis has never shied away from tackling difficult issues or musical challenges. The 24-city tour of Blood on the Fields, his jazz-blues three-hour epic oratorio on slavery, (through February in the United States, March in Europe) demonstrates that he is capable of scaling heights not achieved before.

In a dramatic/musical production, the subject of slavery can be approached from different angles, but generally, any approach will lead to performer/audience recriminations and (usually) audience anxiety. Wynton Marsalis wisely steers clear of the politically didactic approach and instead engages his audience in the broader

social implications of slavery. He focuses primarily on the spiritual ascendancy crisis all suffer who choose slavery over freedom of mind and body.

In a musical analysis of that crisis, he introduces Leona and Jesse. Jesse, a proud prince (who once owned slaves himself) is brought low by the material and spiritual yokes of his own enslavement. Leona, who loves him, walks a fine line between being "long suffering" and a "wise priestess."

It is appropriate that Marsalis does not dwell on the debasement females endured in slavery, but portrays Leona as a transcendent being, able to assist others on the journey. In this production, the concept of slavery as a metaphor for "anything that we cannot

escape" is utilized far more effectively than most productions on the subject.

The winter tour is midway through the first year of Jazz at Lincoln Center's initial season. As artistic director, Marsalis has filled the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra with rich music makers, who although individually unheralded, evoke comparisons to Pharoah Sanders, Gato Barbieri and Miles Davis. The entire ensemble (with the exception of saxophonist Gideon Feldstein) carries its weight. This group represents big band orchestras as they were in their glory days, particularly on the songs "Back to Basics" and "You Don't Hear No Drums."

Vocalist Miles Griffith has a powerful voice, full of feeling and sardonic wit on tongue-in-cheek tunes. I was less impressed with the vocal stylization of Cassandra Wilson. Although she has a rich deep voice, she was very restrained in the emotional passage the music was travelling. There are, of course, quiet times in the life of any single song, but her failure to soar and emit deeper emotional resonance in her singing persisted, even when the music itself shifted in emotional response.

And then there is the great



WYNTON MARSALIS

Jon Hendricks, who get better with age. A little grayer and a little heavier, he carried his role through with the musical genius all expected, and then some. His notes were spilling out, ripe and round. He virtually bubbled over with scat, his hands extended in front of him working an invisible saxophone. At the end of each of his segments, the audience at the San Francisco theater erupted with applause and shouts of appreciation.

Overall, one could not have asked for a more enjoyable and intellectually satisfying concert. Particularly helpful was the program which presented the entire lyric verse of the three-hour performance.

It allowed the audience to understand deeper nuances of the entire presentation.

Wynton Marsalis the conductor in this presentation. He has a very 'body-inclusive' way of conducting with clapping, stomping his feet and projecting short bursts of energy from his hands into the air.

His style also includes extensive use of the instrumentalists as a verbal chorus and sometimes as backup singers, the kind of versatility that evokes the early days of jazz.

The stomping and clapping of the musicians also added to the mood of the pieces and demonstrated Marsalis'

attention to the slightest details of the music. The percussive elements gave honor to the most basic tools of African-American music and demonstrated that Marsalis has no intent to leave those roots unwatered. I would like to have heard more of his playing, but when he did play, you knew who was in charge and why.

A concert recording is due out on Columbia/Sony later this year. For more information, about the tour, call 212-875-5298.

Jazz poet and singer Maketa Groves wrote this review for Griot, the African-American, African and Caribbean business daily. For more, call 800-840-0465.

Etiquette

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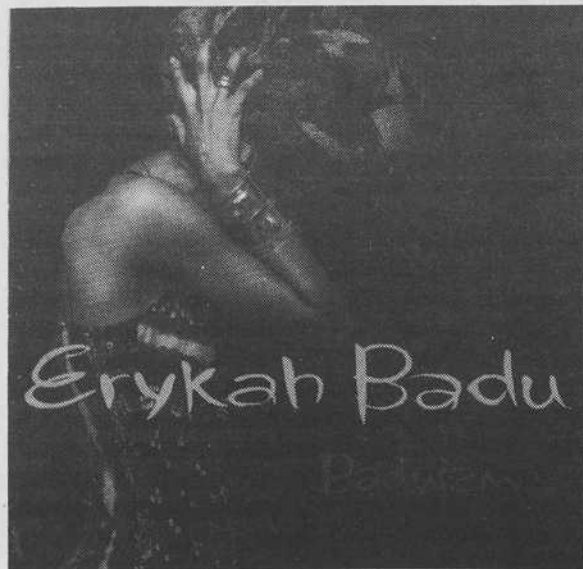
"And never swear. People get into a social situation and they let their guard down. People are still often perceived as less intelligent if you have to swear to make your point."

Telephone Manners

A recent addition to Wilger's bag of tips is cell phone etiquette.

"Technology poses some etiquette questions that are entirely new to us. For example, cell phone time is often expensive. Don't ask to use someone's cell phone unless it is an emergency, especially if that person is a client. But regardless of whose phone it is, always offer to pay for the call."

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Etchings

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p.m. Charles Douglas directs and musical direction is by Eric Butler.

"ABOUT SAMARIA GRAHAM"

According to her press people rising actress Samaria Graham laid everything on the line about her co-starring role and her action packed scenes with Linda Hamilton in "Dante's Peak," at a recent press confab held on the set of

the ABC-TV Movie of the Week "On The Line" that'll air in May. She also talked about her upcoming movie "Nothing To Lose," starring Martin Lawrence and Tim Robbins.

Additionally she's resigned as the commercial spokesperson for Phillips Gel Caps, and has been getting fantastic reviews for her starring role in the stage production of "The Talented

Tenth." There was also the news about her writing a sitcom called "Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of," that will star Samaria with Ja'Net Dubols of "Good Times" fame.

"CASTING CALL FOR NATIONAL TOURING GOSPEL PLAY"

Playwright/producer Angela Barrow will be in Tinseltown to cast for actors, actresses and singers to play roles in the revamped version of her newest gospel play "Why Good Girls Like Bad Boyz" over the February 22nd weekend.

The casting call for this national touring production will take place on Saturday, February 22nd, beginning at 10:00 a.m., in the Conference Center of the Wilshire Radisson Hotel. Interested parties can call Lanier Media Services at (818) 386-2790 to arrange for an appointment ... and that's Hollywood this time!!

Until the next time, Lanier.

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