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MSU dares to live 'The Life' to the fullest

By TOM HELMA

It's a euphemism, expressed with a sense of irony. "The Life" is a sarcastic way of describing the life of a street prostitute, which is, of course,

no life at all. Is it possible that a renowned jazz pianist, Cy Coleman, better known for the successful light-hearted Broadway musicals he has written, can create an operatic play of the same name — "The Life" — without also inadvertently glorifying the street life of a prostitute? As presented by Michigan State University's Theatre Department collaborating with the MSU School of Music, the answer is a resounding yes! Energetically danced and sung, of course, but not without a corresponding pathos for the despair and emptiness of the street lives of the characters presented in this play.

A cyclone-fence-caged pre-1980s 42nd Street and Seventh Avenue New York City street scene is reconstructed in the abstract by scene designer Kirk Domer. The message is already clear: This street is a prison.

The prostitutes, pimps and hustlers who live here are self-condemned to a

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life of desperation and pain. A neon light flickers on, the multi-colored torso of a naked woman blinking in reds and greens. Bar lights and the old yellowing bulbs of the Triple XXX movie theater also spread light across this run-down city block stage set as Frank Williams, in one of six lead roles, invites us to get to know Jojo, a beguilingly charming drug dealer and all-around hustler who leads the entire cast of well over 30 individuals in a hell-of-a-knock-out opening number. Wow!

Costumes are simply magnificent, with Karen Kangas-Preston inventing 18 very original slinky, skimpy, Fredericks-of-Hollywood style outfits. Tiger-striped tights compete with a lavender ruffled blouse for one young “thang,” while one of the pimps combines purple velour with a red pork-pie hat.

The music is powerful; Brad Fowler’s lead trumpet and Christopher Gherman’s back-up trumpet yelp and screech over as many as eighteen other instruments delivering a tightly written musical score.

This play belongs, however, to Sharriese Hamilton, who, as Queen (the “ho” with a heart), alone escapes “the life.” Hamilton, as Queen, is elegant and holds on to a sense of personal integrity, even as she is violently abused and beaten on stage by Memphis, the white-suited pimp played by Christopher Austreng.

Right beside Hamilton, however, is Bonique Johnson, a tall Amazonian actress who is just a bit too attractive to play the part of the over-the-hill mother-figure prostitute Sonja, but effective nevertheless.

Vocally, these two women have perfected the chanteuse style of jazz singing popularized by Dinah Washington and Billie Holliday and end the play with a touching duet about friendship in the trenches of lost souls.

Austreng, whose powerful bass singing voice reverberates throughout the auditorium, is a thoroughly effective villain, while Nathaniel Nose, as the love-interest pimp/boyfriend of Queen, delivers a solid performance as the embittered Vietnam vet turned coke addict.

Set designer Kirk Domer has saved his best contribution to this well-performed play for last. The New York street scene opens in the middle to reveal the blinking lights of an impossibly far-away New Jersey skyline. It takes several minutes for one to realize that he has taken advantage of Fairchild Theatre's having no fixed back wall, but instead only a curtain that separates it from the lengthy MSU Auditorium.

The female ensemble in this production contributes exuberance and enthusiasm to their roles, but at no time does one succumb to thinking there is glamour in the lives of these tragically limited people. These characters portray young women and men who likely were sexually abused as children, who, running away, attempting to escape one prison, find themselves now in another not very much larger one.

Bravo to Michigan State University for selecting this controversial work and performing it, in every respect, exceedingly well.

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