

Jazz it up and have a ball

A Bed and a Chair advanced the practice of adapting Sondheim for jazz

REVIEW BY DAVID R. ADLER

There's a tension in jazz when it comes to interpreting famous songs. Do you stick to the composer's intention and let the melody speak for itself? Or do you depart from the original in the hope of offering new musical insights? In *A Bed and a Chair: A New York Love Affair*, an Encores! special event presented by Jazz at Lincoln Center and New York City Center (Nov. 13-17, 2013), trumpeter and JALC managing and artistic director Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra took the former route in adapting Stephen Sondheim's work.

Directed and co-conceived by Tony Award-winning Sondheim authority John Doyle, the show was a far cry from Marsalis's collaborations with the likes of Chick Corea, Ahmad Jamal, Willie Nelson and Eric Clapton. Of course, the JLCO usually does concerts, not musical theatre, so its task here was different. There were very few solos, even on a stage packed with virtuoso improvisers. The songs, or more accurately the arrangements, were king.

There were 27 numbers, one a medley. Band members Marsalis, Ted Nash, Vincent Gardner, Victor Goines and Sherman Irby split the arranging duties. JLCO associate Richard DeRosa arranged seven scores as well. The music was tight and propulsive, often bluesy and swinging; yet the JLCO sounded more like a pit band, albeit an unusually hot one.

In the spotlight were four singers: Jeremy Jordan (who subsequently appeared in *Six* by Sondheim) and Cyrille Aimée as a young couple, and Bernadette Peters and Norm Lewis as an older couple. The characters were nameless, and while the partners did swap at one point, there was no clear-cut storyline. Instead, Sondheim's songs established different states of mind, bringing to life the characters' views of love and the city. A small cast of dancers (Meg Gillentine, Tyler Hanes, Grasan Kingsberry and Elizabeth Parkinson) also joined intermittently (choreography by Parker Esse) as "shadows," following the main characters around in silence, perhaps like a subconscious. It was reminiscent of moments in *Follies* and, to a lesser extent, *A Little Night Music*, but over time the device grew distracting. And throughout the evening, vibrant aerial video footage of today's Manhattan skyline (with the new One World Trade Center) appeared on a large screen overhead (projections by Steve Channon).

Aimée is easily one of the most gifted and creative young vocalists on the jazz scene. However, she isn't a Broadway belter. The subtle contour and agility of her voice got a bit over-

whelmed in the big hall. Opening with "What More Do I Need?" she didn't quite get across all the laugh lines. But her two short scat breaks — one in "Live Alone and Like It," the other a trading round with Marsalis in "You Could Drive a Person Crazy" — instantly sparked excitement. She seized her opportunities and nailed them.

Coming from Broadway, TV and film, Jordan was entirely in his element and in strong voice. He was also outfitted with some props: a coffee container on "Another Hundred People" and a smartphone on "Losing My Mind." Aimée also read on a laptop, if memory serves, while lying in bed in another scene. The idea of modernizing Sondheim has figured into previous productions such as 2012's *Marry Me a Little* and 2013's *The Bluest Ink* — the sense of characters in motion in the midst of contemporary lives holds genuine appeal, but sometimes singing while texting just looks like singing while texting, conveying detachment and boredom.

Even so, it was hard to quibble with Peters and Lewis. Peters, certainly no stranger to Sondheim, was spot on with both her showstoppers, "Broadway Baby" and "The Ladies Who Lunch." Lewis's emotional connection to songs such as "Someone Is Waiting" and "Loving You" was palpable and deeply moving. There were duets and soaring full-company numbers as well, including the closing "Rainbows."

That jazz and Sondheim can go together is part of a story nearly as old as Tin Pan Alley itself. Pianists Terry Trotter and Bill Mays, saxophonist Bobby Hsu and others have interpreted Sondheim in nuanced and rewarding ways (see p. 27). Marsalis and his colleagues, in keeping it fairly straightforward, furthered the practice and evoked a theatre band tradition stretching back to the origins of African-American music. The point wasn't so much to "swing" Sondheim as to do right by the beauty that's already there. [TSR]



PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

Cyrille Aimée, Jeremy Jordan and Bernadette Peters (L-R) performed in *A Bed and a Chair*.