**‘Lady Day’ is must-see at The JET**

[Review](http://www.encoremichigan.com/category/review/) October 08, 2017 Patrice Nolan

WEST BLOOMFIELD, Mich.— The Jewish Ensemble Theatre opens its 2017-2018 season with ***Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar and Grill*** by Lanie Robertson – a moving, musical retrospective of iconic jazz vocalist Billie Holiday. Directed by Lynch Travis, this powerful 90-minute show demands incredible talent of its leads – Detroit natives Lauren LaStrada as the eponymous Lady Day, and Alvin Waddles as Jimmy Powers, the man at the keyboard. It takes serious jazz chops to make this play work – and they indeed work wonders.

The play is set on the tiny stage of a rundown Philadelphia nightclub in March of 1959. It’s a club where Billie played on her way up in the world, but when this story opens, she is near the end of a painful slide into alcoholism and heroin addiction. Even so, her spirit is indomitable; she has embraced her demons and makes no apologies for who or what she is. Strung out and struggling to perform, she leans heavily on the skill and good will of her loyal accompanist Jimmy. But when she begins to sing, the old magic is still there.

LaStrada does an uncanny job of capturing the signature phrasing and tempo shifts that made Billie Holiday such a standout, even at a time when the swing era boasted an embarrassment of amazing vocalists. Both her singing and reminiscent banter carry the playful but defiant gaiety of a woman whose life has been defined by unspeakable sorrows and indignities. She refuses to be an object of pity, and it is with a jaunty smile that she talks about whatever pops into her head. She matter-of-factly covers how to cook perfect pigs’ feet; being raped at the age of 10; the influence of Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith; her life as a child prostitute; traveling in the south with Artie Shaw’s all-white band; taking heroin to prove to her man that she loved him; even her nervousness when performing at Carnegie Hall after spending a year in prison. Because of that conviction, she has been denied the cabaret card she needs to perform in top-dollar NYC venues – a vindictive act that effectively cuts her off from her only means of earning an income. She is destitute.

Alvin Waddles, who also provides Music Direction, is lovely as Jimmy Powers. He scrutinizes Billy closely from behind the baby grand, soothes her jitters, and tries to steer her toward the popular tunes they’ve been contracted to perform. When Billie suddenly runs off stage to get a fix, Jimmy plays a delightful solo number. To cover for her, he explains to the audience that she is “unwell” and has a doctor backstage. But Billie reemerges and, since she’s “among friends” in the Philly club, holds nothing back; she refuses to let the lie stand, and it is that fundamental veracity that comes through in both her music and boozy cheekiness.

This is a hypnotizing show that, for all its tragic underpinnings, is somehow triumphant. It is must-see theatre for anyone who loves jazz, Billie Holiday, or any music that is vitally true to the human condition. Lynch Travis takes great care to create a space in which we become the lucky nightclub audience; we are the privileged ones who experience this intimate, outrageous performance – certainly one of her last.

*Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar and Grill* is set four months before Billie Holiday stopped outrunning her demons. Her biographers tell us that in July she was hospitalized for heart and liver problems related to alcoholism and heroin addiction. As a final insult, the authorities saw fit to arrest her and handcuff her to her hospital bed on narcotics-related charges. She beat the rap by dying on July 17 at the age of 44.

Mercifully, back at Emerson’s Bar and Grill, the music fades out while the incomparable Lady Day is still doing the one thing she does better than anyone – singing what’s in her heart – and breaking ours in the process.