

Kuntu Repertory produces story of jazz great Lester Young

by Lisa McClendon

Courier Staff Writer

The University of Pittsburgh's Kuntu Repertory Theater has enlisted the talents of guest director Caroline Jackson Smith and actor Benjamin Cain Jr. to produce a compelling interpretation of OyamO's play "The Resurrection of Lady Lester."

"I love this play," said Smith.

"Lady Lester" focuses on the life of jazz saxophone great Lester Young, who performed with the Count Basie Orchestra as well as with the legendary singer Billie Holiday. This play marks Kuntu's second production of the season, which is dedicated to celebrating the Harlem Renaissance.

"The play is about resurrection. Because to me, OyamO is looking into the life of Lester Young and finding out how the music became sort of a product of his soul and the thing that

rose above his own personal difficulties and the racial difficulties of the time and also the thing that is eternal that keeps living," Smith said.

OyamO, a professor at the University of Michigan, named the play "Lady Lester" to reflect Young's belief that any musician who has a song in his soul was a "lady" regardless of their sex.

In 1992, Smith, 45, directed "The Resurrection of Lady Lester" at Oberlin College, where she is an associate professor of theater and African-American studies.

Eventually, word of Oberlin's outstanding production of "Lady Lester" reached the University of Pittsburgh. So, Vernell Lillie invited Smith to participate as guest director for the Woodie King Jr. Professional Director/Producer series.

"The Resurrection of Lady Lester" began Jan. 29 at Stephen Foster Memorial Au-



"LADY LESTER"—Kuntu Repertory Theater's guest director Caroline Jackson Smith, right, and actor Benjamin Cain Jr. take on the challenge of OyamO's "The Resurrection of Lady Lester" at the Stephen Foster Memorial Auditorium.

ditorium in Oakland and will run until Feb. 14.

An exceptional director, Smith, a native of Inglewood, N. J., was not always interested in theater.

At Yale University, Smith pursued a degree in Afro-American studies. In 1974, she was among the second graduating class of women at Yale. She also received a teaching certificate and began teaching Afro-American studies in high school.

It was not until 1980, when Smith returned to Yale as the director of the Afro-American Cultural Center, that she began producing and directing live theater with drama students Charles Dutton and Angela Bassett.

Smith's interest in theater began after returning to Yale when she was simply looking for ways to interest students in the cultural center.

"I found that in the early 1980s, with students, it was kind of a low ebb time for political activity. So, I was trying

to figure out what would interest the students and get them to support the center and I found that what people were really doing on campus in those years was theater," Smith said. "The drama school was taken over by Lord Richards, who directed all the August Wilson plays."

She then became involved in the theater. By 1989, Smith found herself at Oberlin College, where she now teaches. She also directs on a free lance basis throughout Cleveland.

"I tend to like plays that tell an aspect of the African-American story and that also are interested in how we heal from the kind of history we have," Smith said.

After the run, Smith will head back to Cleveland, where she is an associate professor of theater, to direct a production at the Karamu House—one of the oldest Black theater organizations—established well before the 1920s.

Making her directing chores for "Lady Lester" easier is Cain's talent.

Born and raised in Michigan, Cain, 26, is working hard to become Hollywood's next discovery and join the ranks of African-American actors Denzel Washington, Wesley Snipes, Ving Rhames and Will Smith.

Cain, like many actors, moved to New York to launch his acting career.

"It's cool," Cain said of the New York scene. "It's a different hustle. It's hard. When you're doing stuff there, you get in the mindset of doing two or three things at one time. You can't just do one thing, because one thing is not enough to make money for you to survive."

In 1994, Cain graduated from Carnegie Mellon University. Lillie was instrumental in his transfer from the University of Pittsburgh.

Because of the insecurity of the acting profession, Cain's parents wanted him to attend a liberal arts school to get a balanced education. He attended the University of Pitts-

burgh where he met Dr. Lillie. Going to bat for Cain, Lillie talked to his parents about sending him to CMU.

"She talked to my mother she said, 'Well listen, the boy...he's got enough talent that he don't need to be doing this. Please send him there.' So, the next year Dr. Lillie helped me get together and I went to Carnegie Mellon and I always told her I'd do whatever she wants," Cain said.

So, when she called him about "Lady Lester," he did not hesitate.

Cain has appeared on "New York Undercover" and "Law & Order." He also had a role in the HBO original movie "Criminal Justice" with Rosie Perez and Forrest Whitaker. But now he has taken on a new challenge as Lester Young.

"Most important thing that I liked about (the play) was the fact that it really dug into him," Cain said. "It's not in any chronological order. In the beginning, he's sick and on his deathbed. But then, he goes through parts of his life—things that were important and made him who he is."

As Cain travels through Young's life, he gathers an understanding of Young's experiences.

Born in the deep south of New Orleans, Young lived from 1909 to 1959. He and his family traveled the carnival and minstrel circuit, which he disliked.

"So, he went on in the early jazz movement of the late '20s to become an innovator on the saxophone. He was a complicated man, an alcoholic. He had a very brutal experience in World War II, which is represented in the play," Smith said.

Cain brings to life Young's essence, capturing all the beauty and the pain. But when the play comes to an end on Feb. 14, he will continue his own efforts as a determined actor.

"It's a little frustrating. But if you believe in yourself that you're going to make it, this frustration is nothing but a lesson to be learned. So when you do make it, you can appreciate it and do what you're supposed to do," Cain said. "After this, I live the life of an actor and wait for my next gig and see what I can do."

Other cast members include Catherine J. Friesen, Jack Goodstein, Sala James, Derrick Saunders, Tasha Smith, Karla Washington, Monn Washington and Franklin Westbrook.

To capture Young's musical contributions, Kuntu enlisted the talents of some of Pittsburgh's finest jazz musicians.

"One of the reasons why I love the play is because OyamO has challenged himself to write a play that is as complicated and beautiful as jazz music," Smith said.

Performances are at 8 p.m., with the exception of Sundays, 4 p.m., and a special matinee performance on Feb. 13 at 11 a.m.

Tickets are available at Dorsey's Record Shop, Schenley Heights Market & Deli and Ticketmaster. For more information, call 624-7298.

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