Blues Sisters

Camelot Theatre puts a spotlight on African-American female singers of the Roaring Twenties

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Gayle Wilson, left, and Jade Chavis Watt will star in Camelot Theater's production of "Spotlight on the Blue Divas: The Ladies Who Sang the Blues in the Roaring Twenties." Photo by Steve Sutfin

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By John Darling

for Revels

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There may never be another chance to hear all of the great, blues-singing African-American ladies of the '20s reprised, live, belting out their original songs of the times, when poverty, racism, Prohibition, opium and heartbreak were the daily fare of life.

It's "Spotlight on the Blue Divas: The Ladies Who Sang the Blues in the Roaring Twenties," written by Gayle Wilson, previewing Thursday, Nov. 10, and opening Friday, Nov. 11, at Camelot Theatre, 101 Talent Ave., Talent.

Wilson, along with Jade Chavis Watt, will sing the works of a dozen giants of the '20s and narrate their lives.

The songs illustrate a historic turning point, Wilson says, when booze was suddenly illegal, Victorian modesty was dropped, women got the vote and started shortening their hair and hemlines and black people emerged from plantation life into a racist America — but with musical energy the white world had never seen.

"It was the first time women had a voice in music," Wilson says, "and it was started by black women. It wasn't like anything anyone had ever heard. With the first big hit, 'Crazy Blues,' by the Empress of Blues, Bessie Smith, the record companies immediately looked for more like her, and it took off."

If you go

What: "Spotlight on the Blue Divas"

When: Opens at 8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 11

Where: Camelot Theatre, 101 Talent Ave., Talent

Tickets: $20

Call: 541-535-5250 or see www.camelottheatre.org

The production showcases the works of Smith, Ma Rainey, Sippie Wallace, Ida Cox, Trixie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Victoria Spivey and others, most of them now unknown outside blues circles, says director Presila Quinby, but they were foundational to the fame of Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and other swing greats of the '30s.

"They express such a range of feelings and lots of humor, expressing defiance, righteousness and hope," Quinby says.

In the '20s, black musicians fled the sharecropper regime of the South, working hard lives in the bars and brothels of Memphis, Tenn., Kansas City, Mo., and New Orleans and, from a background of gospel and work songs, created blues and jazz, using frank language to black audiences and, says Wilson, cleaning it up when it went crossover to white society.

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"A lot of people have this impression of the blues as sad, slow and draggy, but that's not how I find it," Wilson says. "They bridged the gap from tragedy to comedy and were masters of the double entendre in matters of drinking, drugs, sex and the complications of love and life."

"It speaks to me," says singer Watt, "of the perseverence and strength of character of these black women going through those times of Prohibition and abject racism, singing in front of all those white audiences and knowing they don't accept you. They sing of hard times and oppression. Music is such a window on the soul, so personal, and it's a testament to the staying power of their musicianship. They were pioneers and it gives me such a connection to my past."

The show's 22 songs include "Memphis Blues," Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "He's Got Me Goin' ," "Wild Women Arrangements are by Michael Vannice. Musicians are Kathy Campbell (piano), Peter Spring (bass), Gary Nelson (trombone), Gary Creek (guitar and banjo) and Steve Sutfin (drums).

Shows are set for 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through Nov. 20. Tickets cost $16 for the preview. All other tickets cost $20. For reservations, call 541-535-5250 or see

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