

^ Ella' swings, thanks to the songs

By Karen D'Souza

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In the world according to jazz, it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing. Luckily for us, Tina Fabrique has got it going on. The elegant chanteuse lets loose something fierce as the First Lady of Song in "Ella."

More of a cabaret revue than a musical, "Ella" spins around 24 of Fitzgerald's greatest hits, from "A Tisket, A Tasket" and "That Old Black Magic" to "Night and Day." Directed by Rob Ruggiero, the show doesn't delve deeply enough into Ella's life to make a truly compelling biography, but there's more than enough sugar in Fabrique's voice, especially her delectable scats, to make up for the weaknesses in Jeffrey Hatcher's book. Whenever the show cuts the patter and sticks to the songs, "Ella" swings.

Fabrique gives the show its zing. If her voice doesn't have quite the same velvet as Ella's, she's still a powerhouse performer with a masterful sense of phrasing and tone. Listening as she (and her hot backup band) launch into the classics of the great American songbook is like floating back in time to a sweeter era when sophistication was king. If you're in the mood for a hum down memory lane, this is it. As Ira Gershwin mused, "I never knew how good our songs were until I heard Ella Fitzgerald sing them."

In a decade when so many performers substitute raunchiness for personality and special effects for charisma, Fabrique exudes the live-wire vibe that gives jazz its zip. She knows how to keep it real, to let the notes shimmer with truth.

Maybe that's how she sings her way into our hearts. Her candor adds a glow to Ella's tale of coming from hardship to attain legendary status. Even after Fitzgerald got her big break at 16, winning the amateur talent contest at the Apollo in Harlem singing "Love and Kisses," theater management wouldn't let her perform. They said her face and figure were too homely for center stage even if she had the voice of a nymph.

Fabrique certainly captures Fitzgerald's look, from the clunky eyeglasses to the flowing '60s gowns and bouffant hairdo and her endearing sense of humility. Ella was no diva, so Fabrique dips her performance in meekness, but when she opens her mouth, her eyes beam. Her sweetly tender rendition of "Our Love Is Here to Stay" melts in the ear like ice cream.

You can see why they called Ella the "Modest Goddess" as soon as Fabrique takes the stage. When she's not singing, she seems almost bashful. As she puts it, "I'm the only woman I know in this business who doesn't have a past. I don't smoke. I don't drink. I don't sleep around."

While there are times when you long for more biographical depth, a sense of the woman behind the pipes - the banter with Ella's manager Norman Granz (Harold Dixon) feels particularly flat - the story is not the point here. The richness of this concert-like evening is in the songs, and in that kingdom, Fabrique reigns supreme.

A cheeky duet with trumpeter Brian "Lord" Sledge, "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," is as delightful as can be, and Sledge's sly Satchmo impersonation is one of the show's gems. But it's Fabrique's own improvisational solos, those horn-like riffs on a theme that transform lyrics into the liquid realm of scat, that truly makes "Ella" wonderful.

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`Ella'

Starring Tina Fabrique

By Karen D'Souza

Upshot: Oh, this Lady be very good indeed. Singer Tina Fabrique lights this charming musical tribute to the jazz legend.

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose.

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, 3 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays through July 22.

Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes, one intermission.

Tickets: \$22-\$56

Information: (408) 367-7255 or www.sjrep.org.