

British Theatre Guide

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Cafe Society Swing

Alex Webb

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Cafe Society Swing takes us back to the racially segregated world of 1930s America where Barney Josephson had the very dangerous idea of opening “a club where blacks and whites worked together behind the footlights and sat together out front”.

Dangerous because it was challenging the rule often backed by horrific violence that restricted where, when, and how black people could be seen. Mixing with white people in clubs just wasn't on.

Josephson pointed out that “the only way they'd let Duke Ellington's mother in was if she was playing in the band.”

But, hardened by the political turmoil of the depression, in 1938, Josephson opened Cafe Society in Greenwich Village, New York. It was said to be the first integrated club in America.

Cafe Society Swing weaves together the story of Josephson and the club with a selection of twenty-five songs celebrating some of the club's great singers such as Billie Holiday (Vimala Rowe), Sarah Vaughan (China Moses) and Lena Horne (Judi Jackson).

The performance includes not only the jazz and blues classics we associate with these singers but also new songs in the style of the era by the show's writer Alex Webb.

Between the songs, three characters from the period all played by Peter Gerald briefly tell us a snippet of history as they introduce the songs.

There is the reporter trying to dish the dirt on the club and becoming increasingly fond of the place as he does. A bartender who had worked there from the beginning tells stories of the way it operated. Barney Josephson finally makes an appearance in the closing section of the show to introduce a very special song.

We hear about the singers he encouraged, his refusal to have anything to do with the mob and his troubles with the notorious witch hunters of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

And there is the account of the odd dinosaur who would verbally challenge his policy of integration.

“Would you let one of them sleep with your sister?” said an outraged customer, to which Josephson replied, “if it was Paul Robeson I'd make the bed for them.”

The stories are always interesting but, being simply told rather than shown, they do lack dramatic tension.

However, the songs are given a very fine performance by an eight-piece band that included the singer Ciyo Brown on guitar accompanying the three women performing songs such as “Stormy Weather”, “All of Me” and “What a Little Moonlight Will Do” in the style of the singers that made them famous.

There was also the English ballad “Lord Randell” given a haunting quality by Judi Jackson.

But the remarkable high point of the evening is when Josephson has the lights lowered for a spotlight on Billie Holiday’s (Vimala Rowe) face as she sings the moving protest song “Strange Fruit”, an outrage against the thousands of black people lynched across America.

The way Vimala Rowe sings and extends the final word in the line “Here is a strange and bitter crop” leaves the audience deeply shaken in the sudden silent darkness.

Reviewer: [Keith Mckenna](#)