

Thursday, February 14, 1980

Lenore Paxton's life goal was always world of jazz

By JIM WINDELL

"When I saw the movie 'The Benny Goodman Story' as a little girl," said grown-up girl Lenore Paxton, "it hit me like an arrow. I saw it several times and was so fascinated by the music those guys played."

Ever since seeing Benny Goodman, Teddy Wilson, Lionel Hampton and Gene Krupa in that movie, Lenore Paxton wanted to be a jazz pianist.

That was a long time ago and Ms. Paxton has not wavered in her life goal. "I've made it my life to get into jazz. I even studied classical music with this in mind. My life was to get to jazz through classical music."

For a number of years, the Troy resident has been one of the best of the local jazz pianists. She has hung out mostly at an out-of-the-way night spot in Madison Heights (John R near 12 Mile) called Bob and Rob's.

Asked how long she and her Quartet have played at Bob and Rob's, she fluttered her eyes and joked that it's been at least "65 years." That's one of the things she's coy about. That and her age. "I'd rather be nebulous and mysterious," she said.

IN ADDITION to playing Wednesday-Saturday at Bob and Rob's, Ms. Paxton also is involved in a recording project helping along a change in her image. "In the last year or so, I've been doing more pop, rock and disco. And I've been singing more."

Rather than continuing as strictly a jazz pianist, she prefers now to be more of a pop-jazz singer and piano player. Her idols had been such pianists as Oscar Peterson and Ahmad Jamal, but she finds that she enjoys a pop-jazz approach. Her voice, pleasant and distinctive, suits the medium admirably.

She's owned a house in Troy for some six years and has worked in some of the finest clubs in Detroit, while always returning to the Madison Heights club. "I've been fortunate," she said cheerily and then ticked off the clubs. She's played Boker's Keyboard Lounge, The Caucas Club, Playbox Club and Act IV came quickly to her mind.

The Act IV was Clarence Baker's late '60s attempt to go with a sophisticated club in Detroit's cultural center, offering a variety of big name entertainers.

Ms. Paxton deprecatingly jokes that

A recording project is helping along a change in her image. 'In the last year or so, I've been doing more pop, rock and disco, and I've been singing more.'

— Jazz pianist Lenore Paxton



Lenore Paxton is expanding her horizons from jazz pianist to pop songstress, too.

she had her biggest claim to lasting immortality at the Act IV. "I ironed John Davidson's shirt," she said laughing. "He was so desperate before a performance, and someone had forgotten to iron his shirt. I was playing piano that night. Somehow we were able to hussle up an iron and I did his shirt."

THERE WAS a time, however, when

to work with star-quality performers. These included Peggy Lee and Julie London, among singers.

Despite these heady experiences, she decided her future was back in the Detroit area. "The whole jazz scene was fading then," she lamented. "I thought I would have a better opportunity back home rather than staying an unknown in New York. As I was trying to get up, the jazz picture was dissolving around me."

And how has it been in the Detroit metro area? "Lovely," she said forcefully. When she looks you straight in the eye, you have to believe her. Her regrets have to do more with her personal development.

"I'm sorry that I didn't have a more open approach to music. I stayed in a narrow jazz thing too long." She's also sorry she didn't take vocal lessons, but when she was a jazz pianist she didn't think she had to sing to augment her piano. "I used to think that Oscar Peterson didn't have to sing, why did I?"

THAT HAS CHANGED and Lenore Paxton has come to widen her musical horizons. As a result, she says, she feels better about her music and her future. "When I began to sing, I began to get introduced to pop and rock. Now, I feel like I'm expanding and I can't foresee the expansion stopping. It seems endless."

That expansion has even led her to do disco, something Ms. Paxton would not have done years ago. With her quartet (Don Fagerston, bass; Kevin Tahirhart, percussion; Gary Stuck, drums), she produces a sound that is rhythmic and diverse, blending straight jazz with every kind of music from the latest pop hit to country and western.

She has recorded the best of her pop-jazz numbers. The record is intended to be a sampling of both the jazz and pop sides of her musical personality.

"We're trying to get a large record company interested now," she said. "But, wouldn't you know it, this is the year the bottom falls out of the record business. That's the way it's gone for me. I've always been a day late and a dollar short."

Lenore Paxton said this, flashing a smile. With her talent and personal attractiveness, she can afford to be modest.

Actors live up to stylish set

By GAY ZIEGER

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Followers of community theater become quite accustomed to modest, bare-essentials sets. Imagine the surprise, then, at the Avon Players production of Lillian Hellman's "The Little Foxes," of finding the following:

A large drawing room filled with fin-de-siecle furnishings; two 12-paned, shuttered; draped windows overlooking a tree-lined front yard; arched double doors leading to a separate dining area; and an oak-paneled recessed hallway complete with chandelier and spiral staircase.

The performers simply had to measure up to the standards set by these environs. Congratulations to Nancy McCall, Bill Fryermuth, and Irene Hanslow McGrew.

Performances of "The Little Foxes" will continue Friday-Sunday and Feb. 22-23 at the Avon Players Theatre in Avon Township.

BASICALLY, THE PLOT deals with three sinister siblings and an offspring who are hell-bent on increasing the family fortune. Sparing no one in their quest, they trample their mates, use their children and abuse, at least verbally and monetarily, the black labor force of the South.

The play is a mean one, requiring great consistency in its meanness. The adversaries must never let down for a moment. Those in whom the hope for the future lies must remain unrelentingly optimistic and must continue to follow their vision, despite frequent physical and psychological beatings. The forces of good and evil are constantly at battle.

Now, this can result in a tiresome haggling, squabbling and confronting, but the players showed a sense of balance, tempering their voices and the underlying bitchiness of the vehicle nicely. They faltered a few times, the tempo was slightly awry occasionally, there were just a couple of really notable moments, but the show was solid and the audience left with a feeling for Hellman and

probably some thoughts about her message.

Two of the most driving performances were given by Bill Doehring and Barb Solverson, as the conniving brother and sister duo. Their words always had an icicle edge, a kind of mordancy.

Ms. Solverson displayed a great bearing and presence, a cold attractiveness. Doehring conveyed a vibrancy through movements, expressions and voice modulation. They seemed controlled and evil enough to be perpetual survivors.

GEORGE HOITZ, as the bullying husband but submissive brother, was true to the part. His effete son, Jeff Woolley more sleazy than sinister, stayed in character.

Paula Richards, as one victim, had a remoteness, an ethereal quality, that was most appealing. One was touched and saddened by her dream that happiness lay in a return to an earlier way of life.

Yet another victim, Vic Zink, masterfully showed the pain inflicted by these vicious people and by his diseased heart. He suffered grandly. The scene in which he and his wife explore the basis of their marriage is almost too stingy.

Oriana De Angelis, the one on whom the burden of escape and ultimate freedom rests, tended toward too great an intensity, but the role was played with feeling and involvement.

The naive servant, Edsel Jennings, played off his employers nicely. He provided one of the few comic moments. Ernestine Malcheff, the savvy servant, also elicited laughter with her effective delivery of one-liners. She conveyed a strength that made it obvious one day black women would no longer be relegated to picking cotton or being mammys.

Jim McAfee, as the big money Northerner, was on stage briefly, but he made a contribution.

'Guys and Dolls' moves along with peppy twosome

By ETHEL SIMMONS

As the slightly tough but tenderhearted Adelaide and her Broadway boyfriend Nathan Detroit, Nancy Gurwin and Edgar A. Guest III are a brassy, well-matched twosome in "Guys and Dolls."

The Broadway musical hit, playing Saturdays and Sundays at the Paradise Dinner Theatre in Detroit, is strong vocally but lacking in the dance department. Overall a competent, lively cast brightens the production.

Ms. Gurwin, the woman behind this Nancy Gurwin Production, is an Adelaide with a mind of her own. Even though Adelaide has been engaged to Nathan for 14 years, Ms. Gurwin makes her character strong-minded, yet sympathetic.

Svelte and blonde, using an exaggerated New York accent, Ms. Gurwin brings an accomplished, professional quality to every phase of her performance. Adelaide is funny and still touchingly sad.

Ms. Gurwin moves with skill and ease when she and the two chorus girls at the Hot Box, where Adelaide sings and dances, do their numbers.

THE HOT BOX DOLLS (Alice Flis, choreographer, and Jan Abramson) don't miss a beat but maneuver more seriously and thoughtfully than chorus cuties should.

Their rather wholesome-looking costumes in "A Bushel and a Peck" include daintily placed strawberries, which Adelaide tosses to the audience — a nice touch. And when Adelaide and the girls strip down to skimpy black lingerie and stockings in "Take Back Your Mink," it's an effective switch.

Surprisingly, the audience at Saturday night's show didn't even murmur. In "Adelaide's Lament," Ms. Gurwin has a chance to reveal two aspects of Adelaide's character, ranging from funny to poignant in the reprise, as she describes her psychosomatically induced cold from being engaged 14 years.

Ed Guest, who also directed the show, is mustached, with a smallish hat

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plunked on his head for a comic touch to his appearance.

He has a breezy, puckish quality, offering a Nathan we can be comfortable with. In "Sue Me," he and Adelaide exchange viewpoints about their lengthy relationship, a witty number in which he shrugs off her complaints.

ALL THE CHARACTERS in the musical hit are well cast, looking much their parts as well as giving solid performances. Ralph Reed as the chubby Nicely Nicely Johnson, one of the gamblers, is especially appealing. He has a melodic voice and sings "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat" — a classic show-stopper — with energy that communicates to the audience.

Tom Steward is the flashy Sky Masterson, who falls in love with Sarah Brown, a mission doll portrayed by Leah Betts. Steward fulfills all the expectations we have of Sky, turning in a complete performance.

Ms. Betts is delicate and pretty, her soprano voice blending artfully with Steward's on the duets they share including "Til I Know" and "I've Never Been in Love Before."

The show with intermission break lasts a good three hours and could use a faster pace, but it does move along at fair speed. The dance numbers in particular give the impression that the performers (last weekend was the show's second week) are still learning the routines.

You could almost feel some of the guys and dolls counting their steps.

But the singing and dancing that is so much a part of this show is enjoyable. When early on Nathan Detroit, Nicely Nicely, Benny and the Guys line the stage seven abreast to do "The Oldest Established," they convey a sense of

large-scale fun promised for the entire evening.

OTHERS IN THE BIG cast include Raphael as Benny Southstreet, Joe Lannen as Rusty Charlie, Michael Rose as Harry the Horse and Peter Sonberg as Liver Lips Louie. Each performs with flair. Bill Broyles gets laughs with his snappy portrayal of Big Julie, the visiting gambler and gun from Cicero, Ill.

William Peito is a soft-spoken, pleasant Arvid Abernathy of the Save-a-Soul Mission on Broadway. Bill Hoffman is appropriately forceful as Lt. Brannigan, who repeatedly tries to break up Nathan's floating crap game.

Set designer David Biber and scenic artist Brian Video came up with a versatile plan for making the many scene changes.

Fabric on rollers at both sides of the stage, plus a curtain across the back, are painted with backdrops to suit the action of, variously, Broadway itself, the night club, The Hot Box; the mission; and even a scene in Havana.

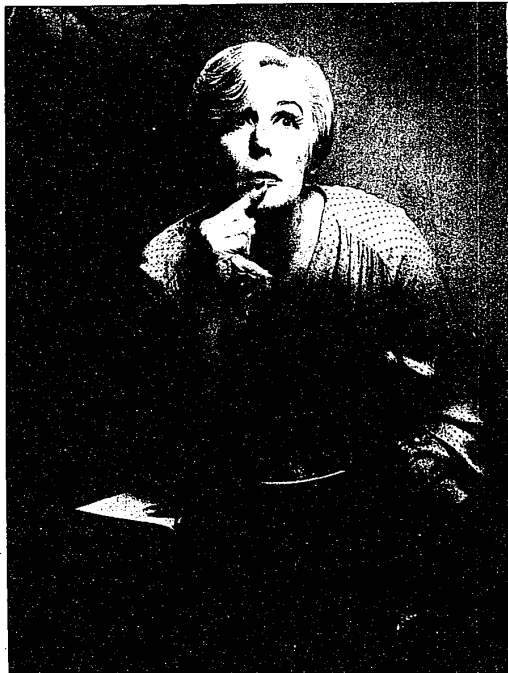
Barbara Anne Gowans is the musical director and pianist for the show, with Felice Bernadara on percussion and Chris Murrell on bass. They create a bright sound for the show's fabulous score (music and lyrics by Frank Loesser).

"Guys and Dolls," billed as a musical fable of Broadway, still has the appeal of its colorful Damon Runyon characters. The book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows does justice to the sharpies and soft touches alike.

OF COURSE, things have changed since the days when "Guys and Dolls" first played on Broadway back in the '50s — when Adelaide first fibbed to her mother that she and Nathan were married, and when it was daring for the mission doll Sarah to fly to Havana for dinner with Sky Masterson.

Time has removed some of the delicious shock from the show, but it's still a wonderful, nostalgic entertainment.

The buffet dinner at the Paradise has got to be one of the best menus offered at Detroit area dinner theaters.



Adelaide (Nancy Gurwin of Southfield) ponders her relationship with Nathan Detroit, longtime fiancé, played by Edgar A. Guest III of Birmingham, in the Paradise Dinner Theater show "Guys and Dolls."