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(P1D)

Pat Flowers keeps pace with old jazz, new tunes

By JIM WINDELL

His nose bends at a certain angle that gives him a look of a prize fighter. His close-cropped hair does nothing to belie that image. He looks at first glance like a youngish man.

As he sits behind the piano bar he crunches up his face that is still unlined and with a high tenor voice that doesn't belong with the face sings Lennon and McCartney's "Yesterday."

When his hands touch the piano keys, there is brilliance. But, he doesn't let it show in everything he plays.

Like a boxer, Pat Flowers has learned to pace himself. In that regard, he is a real old-timer.

When it comes to the jazz piano, Pat Flowers is as authentic as Detroit will ever see. And he has credentials to prove it. "A lot of people, including myself, wonder how I made it this long," Pat Flowers jokes.

As gracious as he is knowledgeable about the history of the jazz piano, Flowers left the piano bar readily at Darlin' Lilly's, where he is nightly ensconced at the restaurant's piano bar. He's been there since last fall. He flourishes some of his classic piano skills six nights a week at the Orchard Lake establishment. He learned these skills at the knees of Fats Waller and James P. Johnson.

FLOWERS JUST doesn't look that old. His dark eyes are piercingly clear and his skin is unwrinkled.

"It's a miracle I'm still around," he laughs with an infectious aliveness. He is talking about the Jazz Society of Europe looking him up a couple of years ago to ask him to come to the continent for a concert tour.

"They specialize in looking for old-timers and they wrote to me in New York Musician's Union to see if I were dead or alive. They found me in Detroit."

He did that tour as well as some recordings that have yet to be released. The tour was several weeks. It was my first trip to Europe, but it didn't last nearly as long as I wanted it to. I loved it. If I were younger, I would have stayed in Europe."

When he returned to the Detroit area, his 12-year engagement at Farmington's Danish Inn had ended and he planned to take it easy. The planned time off ended with his acceptance of owner Pat Campbell's request to help her open Darlin' Lilly's on Orchard Lake in Farmington.

There have been many times he was "house piano player," but he balks at the suggestion that he was the "house pianist" in the beginning for the world's oldest night club.

"It was a hole in the wall," he says laughing at what Baker's Key-board Lounge was when he agreed to take the piano job. "It was the end of the bus line. It had little wooden seats, a wooden screen door and no liquor license."

HOW HE got the job was a coincidence and a little charity on his part. "I was playing in New York at the time (mid 50s) and came home to visit my ma."

"I thought I would get a job here to defray expenses. I went to this looking agency downtown and I was standing in the outer office and I heard a man on the telephone say, 'I ain't got a piano player.' I walked over and said, 'You've got one now.'"

"The man said this job was way out on the outskirts of Detroit and the guy wasn't paying any money. They told me where it was, at Livermore and Eight Mile, and I said I could walk there from my house."



Pat Flowers plays piano at Darlin' Lilly's on Orchard Lake Road in Farmington. (Photo by Jim Wendell)

"The one thing about (Clarence) Baker that was so wonderful, he let me alone. He realized an artist has to be relaxed. He relied on my judgment about what to play. You felt free and the music poured out."

— Jazz pianist Pat Flowers

"I went right over at 2:30 in the afternoon and there was one customer in the place. Baker said to play a piece for him, so I started playing. When I was done, Baker said, 'I can't pay much money.' I quoted a price I wanted, it was really a small figure. The customer leaned over and told Clarence he better sign me."

"Baker did sign me, but it was more money than he had ever thought of paying. That night when I started to play, there were five or 10 people in the place. It was really nothing more than a holdup stand. But when they heard me play, they went out and got their friends and the place was filled that night. It was standing room only and it just grew from that."

BAKER LATER had ideas about bringing in nationally known jazz figures and eventually Flowers went on to other jobs, but Flowers remembers things about Clarence with some affection. "The one thing about Baker that was so wonderful, he let me alone. He realized an artist has to be relaxed. He relied on my judgment about what to play. You felt free and the music poured out."

Near the end of the 1930s, Flowers was to return to live and work in New York. There he began a recording career that almost took him to the heights of fame and success. "It started out good," Flowers said, "but then it fizzled out."

There was an element of bad luck in that. Fats Waller was high on Flowers and saw him as the most likely musician to succeed him. When Waller made his last public appearance in Greenwich Village in New York in the early forties, Flowers played with his band. During the performance, Waller announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, Pat Flowers from Detroit will take over for me when I go."

After Waller died in 1943, Flowers inherited his band. Between 1944 and 1946, he made over two dozen recordings both as a band leader and as a solo artist. Most of the records were for RCA Victor, the same company Waller made the bulk of his recordings for. RCA seemed to have big plans for him.

FLOWERS TELLS what happened. "RCA recorded me singing 'Ain't That Just Like A Woman.' Un-

lucky for me, Louis Jordan recorded the same song at the same time and he just dwarfed me."

He jokes about that singing voice now. A voice that is very much, a part of his piano bar personality. "I never was a singer. I just made sound. You don't have to have a great voice." He refers to how he earns his living.

"I play strictly what the audience wants. Way back then, I was, well — artistic." He recognizes that in a piano bar he has to be conscious of contemporary trends in music.

Pat Flowers started out as a kid in Detroit who could play the piano by ear. His mother saw to it that a neighbor would begin giving him lessons. Then he himself saw his potential. "You realize that you have to learn," and he went to leading conservatories in Detroit. But his real lesson came in New York from Fats Waller and James P. Johnson, two jazz greats.

"Fats and Jimmy, they groomed me."

"A lot of people could copy their records. But, I feel so lucky that Waller and Jimmy taught me the formula. That means taking a tune and playing it like a Fats or a Johnson would. I would go to Jimmy's house every Sunday."

What was the formula? "If I told you, then it wouldn't be a secret." He laughs in his hearty and squeaky voice while his black eyes twinkle.

Meadow Brook does good work with weak play

By HELEN ZUCKER

Meadow Brook Theatre's production of "A Life in the Theatre," directed by Charles Nolte, is a beautifully produced version of a thin play.

The production runs through March 23 at the theater in Wilson Hall on the Oakland University campus near Rochester.

David Mamet's "comedy" is really a series of sad, vaguely mean episodes about the rise of a young actor and the decline of an old actor. It's a play that lacks focus; there is no pulse at the center.

Neither character made me care very much about his career, and I expect the fault lies in the nature of this kind of self-reflective art. It's difficult to care about people who give you theories (the older actor), and people who want to "make it" — i.e., dine at Sardi's and wear three-piece, pinstriped suits (the younger actor).

MAMET'S PLAY about life behind stage is watered David Storey, diluted Harold Pinter, in short, it's weak tea.

The set, by C. Lance Brockman, is absolutely stunning. The George Segal sculptured stagehands standing at a facsimile of a lighting box, bent over a sewing machine in the backstage dressing rooms the play takes place in; the beams, props and theater machinery, all set me up for an evening of exciting theater.

This is the place where magic can happen, but alas, nothing much does. This is the first time I have ever seen a set that deserved a better play.

Even the "plays within the play," the scenes the two actors enact when they are "onstage," are not funny. Wigs fall off, the actors forget their cues and scream for scripts as the curtain comes down.

What's funny about actors not learning their lines? There's a mildly rocking attitude toward the audience that is irksome; Mamet seems to be calling theater-goers dunderheads. He implies we will applaud wildly and laugh at anything, while backstage the actors fuss incessantly about weight and makeup and stamp on the scripts.

THERE ARE arch comments about Detroit critics, surely not in Mamet's script, but detract even more from the illusion that we are backstage in a N.Y. theater.

Eric Tavaris as Robert, the older actor, seems bent on making us feel we are in a private living room, rather than in a theater. Tavaris is a very

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clever actor with a gift for turning whatever play he is appearing in into a vehicle for his own show. Tavaris roller skated drollly through everyone else's lines in "The Adventures of Scapin" and made the cast of "Table Manners" move to his timing that production year.

In "A Life in the Theatre," Tavaris lifts his expressive forehead, mugs, mimics and once again bends the show to his own rhythm. A two-man show is a difficult business; teamwork is essential, but Tavaris is out there on the boards working on his own.

One of the ironies of this play is Robert telling John, the younger actor: "Don't do so much. Do less with your hands, please." The idea that any actor could crowd Robert, as played by Tavaris, is absurd.

We are supposed to feel pity for the aging Robert, pain at his suicide attempt, his loneliness. Instead we are left feeling that Robert is a nuisance who will never age. In Tavaris' hands the old teacher-theatrical emerges as an actor who will never be stamped.

TOM SPACKMAN manages to hold his own as John, the younger actor. I had difficulty believing in Spackman as a humble student, but I think this is a flaw in Mamet's script. When we first meet the young John, he seems to have already learned the ropes. He knows exactly who to call, how to listen politely, how to cut through the bull and plays his "onstage scenes" better than he should. He even knows how to get movie offers.

But Spackman emits a razzle-dazzle that makes his very swift rise possible. Once Spackman has left his jeans for his natty three-piece suit, there is no stopping him, and he is very good at the finale.

Spackman is totally believable as a successful actor bent on going places. And he delivers Shakespeare's speech from Hamlet: "What's Heeuba to him or he to Heeuba, that he should weep for her?" with passion.

The speech seems to sum up this play neatly. Mamet's characters are people who use each other. They do not seem to really care about each other.

The Segal-mimicry sitting in the audience onstage play beautifully into all the scenes. Brockman has caught the essence of this play in his set.

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'South Pacific' performed well

By GAY ZIEGER

The music of "South Pacific" is so familiar that most everyone can hum along and a few can even remember the lyrics from when they entered the nation's vernacular club in 1948.

While that Mary Martin-Ezio Pinza magic is hard to recreate, the Troy Players gave it a good shot under the direction of Bob Olesinski. Their next performances are Friday and Saturday at the Troy Community Center.

This Rogers and Hammerstein musical, based on James Michener's Pulitzer Prize-winning story, takes place on two islands in the Pacific during a respite in the war with Japan. It intertwines the lives of military personnel, islanders and a French fugitive fleeing from a mistake of his youth.

These people, thrown together through chance, learn that racial, background and age differences need not be detrimental to relationships.

Basically, the story concerns two sets of lovers: Ensign Nellie Forbush and Emile de Becque and Marine Lt. Joseph Cable and the beautiful islander Liat. We follow them through joy, doubt, estrangement and sorrow to the bitter-sweet conclusion.

THE TITLE ROLES WERE filled most admirably. Bev Lloyd as Nellie had an open-faced fresh quality, a kind of assertive innocence. She appeared healthy and exuberant — and nobody else could look that good with wet hair, having just washed a man-out of it. Her singing voice was almost conversational, which added to her naturalness.

The optimistic intentions of Joe Cortes were more intimidating, but that was proper for the role. He summoned up a few chills with his rendition of "Some Enchanted Evening." His effective combining of sophistication and warmth made him a sympathetic character.

The two subplot lovers, Ed Bondy and Rose Yee, had an earnest youthfulness. Indeed, it was said of Bondy that he was "too young to go out alone." His voice was not that fragile, however. Ms. Yee's lines were limited, but she added beauty and grace to the stage.

Comic relief was provided most enchantingly by Dianne Duchene as the beetle-eating Bloody Mary and James Trick as the seabee heavily into wheeling and dealing. Ms. Duchene was earthy, yet ethereal. These two qualities were most in evidence when she sang lustily and accentuated the words with graceful movements.

TRICK SEEMED ALMOST too comfortable with the role of hustler. He was a Class A conman and gave the audience many a chuckle. He handled his number, "Honey Bun," in drag with a true sense of ludicrous.

Other outstanding musical moments were furnished by the male and female choruses. The women's voices, in particular, blended lyrically, though the more unpolished, rollicking quality of the men's seemed appropriate enough.

There were a few minor problems with the production. The dialogue was too studied and careful, needful of more zest and life. While this lack of vibrancy was nicely compensated for in the musical pieces, it nevertheless prevented the audience from becoming totally engaged.



Ethel Simmons

Two husbands of metropolitan Detroiters (and at least one guest from Windsor) climbed aboard, on a recent Friday night, for the first progressive dinner offered by the Community House of Birmingham.

Everyone seemed in good spirits throughout the evening, where they left the driving to the bus company while the partygoers enjoyed an evening on the town.

The opportunity to partake of the famous Nachus Salad, at a Nachus restaurant, and then go on to the Fox and Hounds in Bloomfield Hills for a main course of steak teriyaki or jumbo stuffed shrimp was hard to resist.

Also part of the package was starting out from the Community House, gathering there for glasses of wine, red or rose wine, and concluding the evening by returning to the Community House for dessert.

THE DESSERT TABLE was laden with contributions from the area's most elegant eateries: Twenny's, the Midtown Cafe and 220 Merrill, all of Birmingham; Restaurant Duglass of Southfield; and Eden Glen of Troy.

Peabody's restaurant in Birmingham was destroyed by fire in January, which prevented its sending along a

promised dessert, but Peabody's did send the recipe, and the Community House made it up. Poppin Fresh Pies of Birmingham, a sandwich shop that specializes in pies, also contributed.

Originally, only one busload was to go on the excursion, but so many people signed up, and many had to be turned away — that a second bus was engaged.

One bus went to Machus Sly Fox in Birmingham, as originally planned, and the other went to Machus Red Fox in Bloomfield Township, for the salad course. Salad-lovers swear by the Machus salad, with its greens, red onion, bacon and fresh-ground pepper all in a "secret," delicious salad dressing.

The groups were served their salads, with chilled forks, in lower level banquet rooms of the two Machus restaurants. Then on to the picturesque, turned Fox and Hounds restaurant, where both busloads convened upstairs in a private dining room.

THE STEAK-TERIYAKI was a tasty, tender cut of meat; I can vouch for that. Those who ordered the stuffed shrimp in lobster sauce found it to be a big and good serving of seafood.

Throughout the evening, conversa-

tion flowed like wine (which also flowed back at the Community House, as an accompaniment to dessert).

Couples and singles arrived, in pairs and groups. The social aspects of the evening, with the chance to meet and exchange talk with new people, was obviously a big attraction.

One woman, at Machus Red Fox, explained she and her husband had been living in Bloomfield Hills for a couple of years now, having moved from another state, but only now were finding time away from the business in Farmington to get out more socially.

The couples at that table appeared delighted to unwind with others sharing the same good mood.

Later, a group of women filled a round table at the Fox and Hounds. One woman, from Southfield, mentioned she and a friend liked to get out to dinner and were pleased with being able to easily start conversations on an outing.

Another woman (from Windsor, who works in Detroit) said she and several friends get together occasionally for dinner and thought the progressive dinner would be more fun than just meeting in a restaurant.

swans from the Midtown Cafe, to name a few.

Many people went back to the big table for their dessert, and waitresses went from table to table, asking who would like a caramel nut sundae with whipped cream (from Peabody's recipe).

After more than one dessert, forks fell from the hands of stuffed partygoers. Glasses of wine were readily available from the beverage table.

The evening concluded with an announcement from Community House Director Dick Saunders that the Glenn Miller Band has been booked for a May 9 high-band dance at the Community House.

However, Saunders doesn't want to encourage people to try ordering tickets now. Tickets will be available by mail order only, through a forthcoming Community House brochure.

If you want to receive the brochure, call the Community House at 644-5832.

The Community House's 1980 fund drive is in progress. The nonprofit community center for the Birmingham area operates solely on contributions and has no tax support. A goal of \$100,000 is sought this year.

Progressive dinner keeps guests happy