

Jazz contrasts highlight concert

By James Windell
special writer

It may have been Wynton Marsalis' extraordinary success at the Grammy Awards that brought the crowd to the Meadow Brook Music Festival. Once there, though, they were treated to a double whammy of superior jazz. Double Grammy winner and boy wonder of jazz, Marsalis was featured star of the concert. Opening act Carmen McRae was icing on the musical cake. Forty years younger than McRae, trumpeter Marsalis sailed through the second set with remarkable diversity.

Marsalis, barely in his 20s, is capable of leading his quintet through a whimsical Thelonious Monk tune ("Think of One") and following that up with a soft and warm trumpet tone on a true standard ("For All We Know"). He also composes and plays original compositions in a self-assured manner that includes blasts of trumpet sounds that pierce the air like Miles Davis at his starkest. Marsalis' extraordinary, controlled solos, whether muted or with open horn, are always liquid smooth. It's enough to send veteran trumpet players running back to the practice room for more work. At a comparable age, Miles Davis didn't have either the same technical or natural abilities.

AMID THE excitement over Marsalis winning Grammys for both jazz and classical recordings this year — a first-time event — there still is a portion of his audience that comes to see this wunderkind in action and to listen skeptically to see and hear if he is everything the publicity says he is. Marsalis is everything he is said to be.

He played only jazz in this concert, and he said that he hoped the curious in the audience would learn to like jazz. This is a man who knows where he is headed, and it's hard to argue with his direction.

Marsalis wants to go further than the jazz of the 1940s. He also thinks the 1970s was a waste as far as jazz is concerned. I don't know if he won any converts at last week's concert, but it was apparent that he has grown and progressed in the year since he was last seen at Meadow Brook, opening for Bob James.

HIS QUINTET, although not well known, is very capable. His younger brother, Branford, plays tenor and

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soprano saxophone with subtle assurance. His soprano work on a Wayne Shorter tune was clear and mature.

When Branford and Wynton play in union, their work has a fire and fervor that reflects their understanding of each other.

Kenny Kirkland is a fine pianist deserving of greater recognition. His long lines and additions to tunes only hint at his central role and real importance to this group. Equally competent on bass is Charles Fambrough and drummer Jeffrey Watts.

THE ICING on the cake was indeed Carmen McRae, who warmed the audience for Marsalis with a 55-minute set that was more thick and succulent carnal than sugary-sweet icing. McRae is a master of vocal inflection and unique phrasing.

Dressed in a long lavender and grey gown, she wore her hair short and tightly curled, along with a naughty look which is perfect when she sings the line "I only think of him on alternate Thursdays" and takes a long pause while looking down her nose. The look and pause say as much as one hundred lyrics.

BACKED BY her regular trio, McRae sang 14 songs, mostly standards, and each a lesson in vocal jazz, not to mention stage presence. She dominates the stage and what her presence alone doesn't accomplish, her voice does.

Making her voice low and raspy, she puts years of painful experience into the phrase "too many 12 o'clock calls" and it becomes beautifully stated elegance.

When she wraps her voice around "Our Love Is Here to Stay," she holds an "s" a couple of extra beats, giving the phrase extra significance.

Whether singing "I Concentrate on You" with a Latin beat or punching out Billie Holiday blues and scatting a chorus, or doing a lovely and expressive "The Man I Love," McRae is the epitome of the gloriously inventive jazz singer.

Together, young Wynton Marsalis and Carmen McRae gave the Meadow Brook audience a lesson in jazz contrasts — and jazz at its finest.

'Chapter Two' missing spark

"Chapter Two" continues at the Farmington Players Barn Theater, 3233 W. 12 Mile, Farmington Hills, at 7:30 p.m. today, and 8:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For ticket information, call 553-6618.

By Barbara Michaels
special writer

"Chapter Two" is not Neil Simon's funniest play, but it has its share of witty Simon one-liners that audiences lap up. The production by the Farmington Players is a satisfactory rendition and features excellent supporting cast members.

The play, which is autobiographical, begins shortly after the death of Simon's wife and chronicles his whirlwind courtship and marriage to his second wife, actress Marsha Mason. In "Chapter Two," Simon is mystery writer George Schneider (played, by

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Jack Griske) and is serious Jewish Maltese (Linda Finder).

Prodded into blind dates by his aggressive brother, Leo (Joseph Haynes), George is most reluctant to re-enter the mating game. Through a phone number mix up, he unintentionally contacts his brother's latest recommendation, Jennie.

Her marriage having just ended in divorce, Jennie, too, is hesitant to date. Two weeks later they are married.

George is torn between his newfound delight in Jennie and a nagging guilt that he is betraying the memory of the first wife he loved so dearly. He rushes head-long into marriage again.

his brother's advice, but once married, he becomes surly and tense from happiness.

GRISKE is a pleasant actor, convincing when he first shyly meets Jennie or succumbs to his overwhelming grief but never quite at ease with his many glib one-liners.

Finder is a competent Jennie but seems to strive too hard for witty repartee. Simon obviously places all the blame for his marriage's early difficulties on himself and portrays Jennie as almost saintly in her love and understanding; it is hard to breathe life into her.

Haynes is marvelous as Leo, the

smooth, fast-talking New York public relations man. His timing and vocal inflections are superb. Leo gets some of the choicest lines and Haynes delivers them with great panache.

As Faye, Simon's closest friend, Mary Ellen Ward is another excellent supporting player. Delays in her own marriage have led her to match Jennie with the kind of man Faye wishes she had. Ward acts a real pro with Faye's brittle, self-deprecating humor.

Director Mary Ellen Carravito never quite gets the exact timing between the principals. It might have helped to change to a summer setting and spare the actors from woolen sweaters and heavy coats in the non-air-conditioned barn theater. (It was warm but not unbearable.)

Nevertheless, Simon is always dependable for an evening of laughter, and "Chapter Two" also adds poignant insight into the playwright's personal grief.

outdoors

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