

CBS' "Stompin'" doesn't make the noise it should

Whitfield, Van Peebles head good ensemble

By Steven Alan McGaw
On March 12, 1926, in the middle of that cultural flowering known as the "Harlem Renaissance," the Savoy Ballroom opened its doors. Like the Cotton Club, the Savoy was a haven for black musicians, singers and dancers, and instrumental to the careers of entertainers like Ella Fitzgerald and bandleader Chick Webb. Its closing in 1958 truly marked the end of an era.

Now, the sophisticated ballroom comes back to life in "Stompin'" at the Savoy," premiering Sunday, April 12, on CBS. Directed by Debbie Allen, the film is set in the years just before World War II and focuses on four young women whose

lives are punctuated by cherished nights spent at the Savoy.

"During the Depression," says Actor Michael Warren, "the Savoy was one of those surreal places that, when you walked in, whatever was happening outside those doors ceased to exist." Warren appears as Calvin Hunter, a ruthless entrepreneur ("opportunistic slimeball," the actor laughs) who determines to romance Pauline, an aspiring singer played by Vanessa Williams.

Lynn Whitfield ("The Josephine Baker Story") plays Esther, whose romance with handsome restaurateur Walter Turner (Mario Van Peebles) is secondary to her

fierce determination to open her own beauty salon. Jasmine Guy is Alice, a country girl in love with New York and a guy named Ernest, played by Darnell Williams. Vanessa Bell Calloway completes the quartet as Dorothy, a mild-mannered housekeeper unprepared for interracial romance with successful white actor Bill Jerome (John Di Aquino).

The Savoy, itself almost another character in the film, is the scene of several enjoyable musical sequences. When it came to choreography, Allen deferred to Norma Miller and Frankie Manning, two of the original Savoy dancers and founders of the New York Swing Dance Society.

Actress/singer Dawn Lewis, a longtime Allen associate on "A Different World," appears as jazz great Ella Fitzgerald. For Lewis, playing the inimitable, innovative singer was an unforgettable experience.

"They were well into shooting," Lewis says, "and Debbie called me and said, 'I need a favor.'" Lewis admits that playing Fitzgerald was intimidating, particularly on short notice. Still, she leapt at the chance, and familiarity with the music was no problem. "As soon as I hung up the phone, I went over to my CDs and cassettes. I've got Ella forever."

In Warren's estimation, the "Stompin'" script written by Beverly Sawyer, "really warranted being a feature film." He credits Allen with assembling "an exquisite cast on a shoestring budget," and says costumers and art direction people "went to great pains to duplicate the period."

Costumes and period details, of course, do not a movie make. "Stompin'" at the Savoy" is at its best when doing just that: swinging and dancing to the timeless music for which the club was known. Less engaging, however, are scenes advancing the four intertwining stories, which seem to lack energy and aim. Of the actors, only Whitfield, Van Peebles and Warren consistently deliver urgency and appeal.



Stephanie Beacham and Christopher Plummer star in *Danielle Steel's 'Secrets'*, this week's Monday night movie on NBC. Gary Collins and Linda Purl also star.

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