

Kim Nalley swings like Ella - sweet, but subtle

Jesse Hamlin, Special to The Chronicle

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Listening to Ella Fitzgerald's beautiful voice - pure, exuberant and eternally fresh - one might get the impression that the singer's life was as sunny as her music. It wasn't.

"She had a lot of terrible things happen to her, but she didn't talk about it. She never complained," says Kim Nalley, the sensational San Francisco jazz singer whose new musical play, "Ella: The American Dream," tells the story of the homeless teenage hooper who became America's most celebrated jazz vocalist. It opens tonight at Petaluma's Cinnabar Theater.

Unlike Nalley's one-woman Billie Holiday show, "The Heart of Lady Day," this is a fully staged ensemble piece. It's set in the 1930s at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom, where Fitzgerald rose to stardom with the ferociously swinging Chick Webb Orchestra. One of the characters is Frankie Manning, king of the high-flying Lindy Hop dancers, portrayed by Kevin Munroe.

Playing Holiday, whose painful life is as well known as her music, was easier than bringing forth the upbeat, reticent Fitzgerald, Nalley says.

"Dramatically, it's a challenge," says Nalley, a forthright and funny woman. "Ella is a more subtle character than Billie. She didn't reveal as much." And vocally, "Ella is just so *good!* She's got a huge range, she's going for it all the time, she's improvising all the time, she never hits a wrong note. This is hard, especially when you have to scat chorus after chorus and every chorus has to be fresh. When Ella scats, it's like a stream of consciousness, melodies coming out of nowhere."

Nalley pours out a couple of dazzling phrases to demonstrate. She's sitting at the dining room table of the Nob Hill apartment she shares with her husband, computer programmer Mike Lewis, for whom she's converting to Judaism. There's a Christmas wreath on the front door and menorahs on the shelves. The room is lined with framed photos of Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan and other jazz stars. Dancer-choreographer Robert Henry Johnson sits across the table, helping Nalley make the final tweaks in her "Ella" script.

Johnson plays Webb, the brilliant hunchbacked drummer who led one of the greatest bands of the swing era. Webb became Fitzgerald's surrogate father, taking the 16-year-old songbird under his wing and nurturing her extraordinary gifts. He'd seen her at the Apollo Theater, where Fitzgerald - who was homeless and dancing for coins on the streets of Harlem - took first prize in the weekly amateur contest. She was going to dance until she saw the dance act that preceded her. Instead, she decided to sing.

Nalley, who has a history degree from UC Berkeley, does extensive research for her shows and insists on getting the facts right. Reading Stuart Nicholson's incisive 1994 Fitzgerald biography, and later revelations in the New York Times, she learned that the teenage Fitzgerald had been abused by her stepfather and the male guards at the Yonkers reform school where she did time after being busted for running numbers. Breaking out of the joint, she ran away to Manhattan, where she lived on the streets until her luck changed.

"Ella didn't like to talk about this stuff. She masked it," says Nalley, who invented some of the dialogue but used direct quotes from the characters whenever possible. "She personified hope and happiness. The way I constructed the play, you find out about this stuff in a very nuanced way. It's like peeling an onion away."

Focusing on Fitzgerald's early success, Nalley sings the songs that Fitzgerald sang at the Savoy, including her classic "A-Tisket, A-Tasket," "Undecided" and "Object of My Affection," whose version by Alfalfa from the Little Rascals "I'm going to try very hard to get out of my head," Nalley laughs. She also foreshadows Webb's death in 1939. Before he died, he turned the band over to Fitzgerald, an unprecedented move in the male-dominated jazz world.

One of the biggest challenges, Nalley says, is to get people to see Ella as the trim, pretty young girl she was in 1934, "not the Ella Fitzgerald they know from the 1960s: overweight, with that frumpy Italian housewife's gown, a bad wig, owl glasses and a

handkerchief. They hear a young voice, but what they see is Ella on 'The Dean Martin Show,' or doing a Memorex commercial. That era is boring. I want to give them the exciting era. I love the Chick Webb period. It's smoldering hot, joyous music. People don't know Ella's story, and they should."

Kim Nalley's "Ella: The American Dream": Premieres at 8:30 p.m. today, then plays at 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat. and 2 p.m. Sun. through Jan. 17. Cinnabar Theater, 3333 Petaluma Blvd. N., Petaluma. Tickets for tonight are \$55 and \$60, \$28-\$35 for the rest of the run. (707) 763-8920. www.cinnabartheater.org.

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