

More "Storyville"

May 11, 1977

"Storyville," which opens at 8 p.m. Wednesday, May 18, in the Mandeville Auditorium of the University of California, San Diego, will be bathed in "psychic" colors and radiating a "saucy, sassy" street savvy its leading lady Ernestine Jackson calls "constantly exciting."

Elan, costume designer for the new musical comedy by Ed Bullins and Mildred Kayden premiering at UC San Diego, says she is "into spiritual things a lot" and has chosen to clothe the denizens of New Orleans' "Back O' Town" section -circa 1917 -- in colors with high psychic energy.

"Burgundies, roses and especially purples have good spiritual feelings. Everyone identifies purple as a royal color," says Elan. "People work well in that color and relate well to other people wearing such psychic colors."

"Storyville" tells of the era when jazz was evolving in New Orleans and of the events surrounding the closing down of the Storyville quarter, termed America's "first experiment with legalized vice." The area was a potpourri of jazz clubs, honky-tonks, whorehouses and smugglers' dens but its residents constituted a neighborhood of people simply making their way from day to day. There was the fervor of creativity, the excitement of a new art form being spawned, amid the struggle of Storyville's people to survive.

When an altercation between some sailors and some Storyville toughs caused the quarter to be closed, jazz and its practitioners scattered north and west.

"These people were making a big change but a change for the better so I wanted to emphasize these high psychic energy colors. But I'm also using a lots of golds and yellows, very 'up' and happy colors. Another 'high' color is green, explains Elan, "and I'm using a lot of 'off' colors, colors most designers don't use on stage -- that is, browns and rusts and orchid, which is usually considered too light a color for the stage.

"People don't get into orchid when they're designing a show. But for me it expresses the freedom of the period when people were creative in a very innovative way, in their own very personal way in their own town. Storyville was unique, not bound by any tradition. They made their own traditions."

Elan says her biggest challenge was to design that "move."

"It's very easy," she elaborates, "to design clothes for people who are going to stand still or simply walk across a stage. But designing clothes for people who are Moving and dancing is difficult."

Jackson, who will portray singer Tigre Savoy, the central female character in "Storyville," comes to the UC San Diego production with several choice Broadway roles to her credit. Jackson was Sister Sarah in "Guys and Dolls," Irene Malloy in the Pearl Bailey "Hello, Dolly" and Ruth Younger in the musical "Raisin."

Jackson says there's a lot of Ernestine in the sultry, earthy Tigre, although she's never played a part like this before.

"I've always played the good girls but these yearnings, these longings inside Tigre, there's a lot of that in me," smiles the actress.

Jackson says she finds Tigre a complex character, expressing a duality, a conflict between her own ambitions and her commitment to her young son Georgey. Tigre, Jackson finds, is a "kind of stray sheep among all the wolves" of Storyville -- part of the society but resisting becoming totally immersed in and corrupted by it.

For much of the show, Tigre fights against her son's intoxication with the "filthy whorehouse music" that is jazz, although it is the music that accompanies much of her life. She wants something better for her son and Jackson says she finds in herself similar conflicts about "what society calls good music" and the raw appeal of the music that speaks directly to her lusty side.

How does she get past her discomfort at playing a part she admits is more raw and more earthy than previous roles?

"There is a lot of rawness in Ernestine," she admits delightedly. "I did not grow up in the ghetto," she explains, "but I've been exposed to it. I'm a very open, honest woman and that's what Tigre is.

"If somebody gets in her way, she'll say, 'hey, look, man, get out of my way' I have been hurt! This is the way it is! So just get the hell out of here!" And that's the way she is and this is a part of Ernestine Jackson which I can very easily identify with.

"It's just that I don't show that side of me so much to my she hesitates dramatically, "to my public," she whispers and then giggles.

Jackson says she considers herself a "musical comedy person." Why does she like doing musicals?

"Because I do live in a fantasy world myself sometimes," she says thoughtfully. "Musicals, you know, they are really kind of unreal because who ever stops at one point and bursts into song?" she laughs, admitting that, despite her joy at the pure entertainment aspect of musicals, she'd like to try a straight dramatic role -- if only someone would offer her one!

"Storyville," following its premiere performance May 18, will play at 8 p.m. through Sunday, May 22, with a matinee performance at 2 p.m. Saturday, May 21. Tickets are \$4.50 for general admission and \$2.50 for all students. Group rates are available.

Tickets may be purchased at the UCSD Theatre Ticket office, 452-4574 or 452-3791, noon-4 p.m., Monday through Friday or at the Pacific Coast Bank, 4871 Logan Avenue, San Diego.

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