



Not the Programme Notes

*Being sundry items of interest about our upcoming productions and the arts in general
February 2009*

The Rise and Fall of Little Voice

Laura is shy and retiring, she spends most of her days with her dead father's record collection. She likes to sing the old songs, the songs of such great singers as Judy Garland, Ethel Merman, Shirley Bassey and the like. And she sounds great! They call her Little Voice.

Mari Hoff is her less than ideal mother, Ray Say is Mari's somewhat disreputable lover. Being a talent scout, he recognizes LV's potential...

The Rise and Fall of Little Voice is now in production, coming to a theatre near you (Laguna Hall) on April 17, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25. Tickets at Laguna and Wollombi stores, or from our website: www.valleyartists.org. Tickets are \$25, Concession \$20, Wednesday and Thursday nights all tickets \$15.

What a challenge for Valley Artists and director Janine Oliver – and especially Jodi Bawden, who plays LV.

Just to whet your appetite for what is to come, and to increase your enjoyment of the show, we thought you might like to know a bit more about some of the larger than life performers you'll meet in this outstanding musical drama.

Ethel Merman

What do Ethel Merman and Bob Dylan have in common? They were both born with the surname Zimmerman. Well alright – perhaps Ethel had a double 'n'.

Ethel was certainly no little voice. Irving Berlin remarked "you'd better not write a bad lyric for Merman because people will hear it in the second balcony". Cole Porter said she sounded "like a band going by."

Her big break came when she auditioned for George and Ira Gershwin, who asked her to sing "I Got Rhythm" and "Sam and Delilah". George was worried by the concerned look on Ethel's face, and offered to change anything she didn't like. "They will do very nicely, Mr Gershwin," announced Ethel, rather nervous, and her cockiness appealed to the Gershwin brothers, and started her reputation for self-assurance.



When *Girl Crazy* opened in 1930, Ethel's rendition of "I Got Rhythm" included her hitting a C note for 16 bars, leading to multiple encores. During the interval George rushed to her dressing room: "Ethel – do you know what you're doing?" "Ethel didn't, so George told her "Well never go near a

singing teacher – and never forget your shorthand.” Good advice, as it turned out.

The script of *Anything Goes* (1934) was constantly re-written during rehearsals. Ethel used her shorthand to record the dialogue as the actors improvised, and then typed out the material herself.

Annie Get Your Gun (1946) was the longest running show Ethel was ever associated with – she starred as Annie Oakley, and sang “There’s No Business Like Show Business”, which became her signature song.

Ethel was always outspoken. She was friends with the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, and advised the former King of England, when she saw the Duchess spending too much time dancing with the one man: “Hey Duke, get off your royal ass and dance with your wife.”

She was married and divorced a number of times. Her final marriage to Ernest Borgnine in 1964 lasted eight days until she filed for divorce on the

grounds of extreme cruelty. In her autobiography she gave it a special chapter – one blank page – and never married again.

Maybe she got a bit crabby in her old age. In *Gypsy* she co-starred with young actress Sandra Church, and they didn’t hit it off too well. When producer David Merrick asked if they were still speaking, Ethel said “Of course I speak to her! Every night when the curtain goes down, I say ‘Go \$#!& yourself!’”

In her autobiography, Ethel wrote: “I don’t want to sound pretentious, but in a funny way I feel I’m the last of a kind. I don’t mean that there aren’t some girls out there somewhere who are just as talented as I was. But even if they are, where will they find the shows like *Girl Crazy*, *Anything Goes*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Call Me Madam* and *Gypsy*? They just don’t produce those vehicles anymore.”

She died in 1984.

Lady Day - Miss Billie Holiday

The 1947 movie *New Orleans* featured such jazz greats as Louis Armstrong, Meade Lux Lewis, Barney Bigard, Kid Ory, Charlie Beal, Woody Herman and Billie Holiday. Not a good movie, and unfortunately most of the numbers were truncated, but if you like jazz, wouldn’t you love to have been on the set!

Billie Holiday is regarded by many as the greatest jazz singer of all times, but... “Billie’s curse was that she was utterly out of sync with her time: a tigress with the soul of a fawn; a pussycat with fangs; ill-equipped to deal with the world of the 1930s and 1940s.”

Her father Clarence served in the U.S. Armed Forces in WWI, where his lungs were damaged by mustard gas. He became a professional musician and played guitar in Fletcher Henderson’s Orchestra. In later years he expressed his concern when Billie started working the New York club scene: “I don’t want anyone to know I’ve got a 20-year-old daughter. They’ll think I’m



an old man. She was just something I stole when I was 15.” Billie compensated by booking just about every top New York guitarist except Clarence.

At the age of ten Billie was raped by a neighbour. He went to jail, but Billie was sent to a home for wayward girls where, as a punishment for a minor transgression, she was locked in a room all night with the body of a dead inmate.

She picked up the name Billie because her mother was a fan of Billie Dove, the silent movie star.

Life was not easy – Billie worked in a Philadelphia brothel, where she probably first heard recordings of Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith.

“One day we were so hungry we could barely breathe,” she wrote. “I started out the door. It was cold as all-hell and I walked from 145th to 133rd... going in every joint trying to find work... I stopped in the Log Cabin Club run by Jerry Preston... told him I was a dancer. He said to dance. I tried it. He said I stunk. I told him I could sing. He said sing. Over in the corner was an old guy playing the piano. He struck *Trav’lin* and I sang. The customers stopped drinking. They turned around and watched. The pianist... swung into *Body and Soul*. Jeez, you should have seen those people - all of them started crying. Preston came over, shook his head and said, ‘Kid, you win.’”

The April 1933 issue of *Melody Maker* proclaimed: “This month there has been a real find in the person of a singer named Billie Halliday (sic)... although only 18 she weighs over 200 lbs., is incredibly beautiful and sings as well as

anybody I ever heard.” One musician who was totally impressed was Benny Goodman – for a while the two dated despite the opposition of both their families- and Billie made her first recording with Goodman.

Her personal life was a disaster. Her first two husbands introduced her to opium and heroin in turn, her third abused her emotionally and physically. She battled alcohol and drug addiction, and served a year in gaol for a narcotics offence in 1948. You can view her FBI records on the web. Finally it all caught up with her, and she was arrested as she lay dying in a New York hospital, where she died on July 17 1959, aged 44.

Lover Man was her first recording for Decca. Although its lyrics describe a woman who has never known love (“I long to try something I never had”), its theme - a woman longing for a missing lover - and its refrain, “*Lover man, oh, where can you be?*”, struck a chord in wartime America and the record became one of her biggest hits.



Of course you know who this is! More will be revealed in our next issue

The artist is the creator of beautiful things.

To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.

The highest, as the lowest, form of criticism is a mode of autobiography.

Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.

Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.

- from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*
by Oscar Wilde.

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We are a not-for-profit organisation where all funds from whatever source are committed to the administration of the organisation and the staging of productions. None of us is paid for our labour.

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PLEASE NOTE: To be included in the program for 'The Rise and Fall of Little Voice' all advertising details must be sent to info@valleyartists.org by Friday 3rd April, 2009