

Cleveland, OH

Love, Janis

Cleveland Play House

Dionysus has left the building, his temple usurped by a new god: the American rock star. So it was at the Cleveland Play House last month with its pulsating and totally groovy *Love, Janis: the Songs, the Letters, the Soul of Janis Joplin*. In front of what looked like an ancient ruin atop the Acropolis (empty beer bottles included), a classic

flamboyance, while Curtin conveyed the intelligence and sensitivity of a more philosophical and introspective Janis.

The script, inspired by the book *Love, Janis* (by Joplin's sister Laura) is an adaptation of letters and interviews woven together with 20 Joplin songs including "Piece of My Heart," "Summertime," "Try," and "Me and Bobby McGee." We learn that Joplin's adolescence was painfully lonely. As a young woman, her articulate and melancholy letters home are about the fun of moving to San Francisco and her rising fame. They are also pleas for her family's (especially her mother's) approval. In a particularly poignant moment, the public Janis tells an interviewer that she'd be no good at marriage and baking cakes. "Good thing I can sing," she jokes. Then the private Janis writes her sister about how lonely the road is. The subtext in all her letters, as well as her music, contains a veiled and heartbreaking plea for acceptance.

The second act is a bit long-winded. Cutting some redundant scenes could make the production a fine, intermissionless concert/musical; in fact, the intermission was jarring (to the actors' credit). After Janis' overdose, there was the obligatory medley of post-mortem greatest hits, but the audience didn't mind at all. When it was all over, before the lights came on, butanes were on high — the universal rock-concert seal of approval.

— Christine McBurney

The Beauty Queen of Leenane

Great Lakes Theater Festival

James Bundy, Great Lakes Theater Festival's new artistic director, made his Cleveland directorial debut this month with a gripping production of Martin

McDonagh's chilling *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* — one of the first mountings of the play following its Broadway run. A bit slow getting started, it took more than a few blackouts between scenes for the show to reach a comfortable pace. But as soon as Bundy and his cast were on track, the audience was hooked.

Aideen O'Kelly (Anna Manahan's Broadway understudy, and this cast's only Irish native) turned in a haunting performance as domineering Mag Folan; her portrayal was at once fierce, vengeful, and vulnerable. Ren Augesen (as Maureen) and John Wojda (as Pato) portrayed the doomed lovers with credible desperation. Augesen, although a bit young for the role, gave Maureen a pathetic poignancy. Equally convincing was Wojda as a middle-aged bachelor grasping for a last chance at marriage. Mark Fish, as Ray, brought vitality to the proceedings with an off-the-wall physicality; his unusual, unexpected moves were at once comic and menacing.

Much credit goes to GLTF's inspired production team. Resident designer John Ezell's morbidly glum set conveyed a dismal and ominous atmosphere with its palette of depressing grays in the dilapidated cottage. Ioni Somogyi's costumes were just as wonderfully dreary. Not even when Maureen was on her way to a "do" at Pato's did her garb give any indication of life: Wearing an outdated ruffled black dress, she was the picture of an old maid. Matthew Frey's lighting was especially effective. The most vivid color was generated neither from the electric lightbulb above the kitchen table, nor from the bleak glow of Mag's TV, but from the peat-burning stove; emitting a red-hot glow that greatly contrasted with the surrounding drabness, it foreshadowed the terror to come.

Aside from a few inconsistencies with the West Irish brogue, Ralph Zito's three Yankee cast members delivered McDonagh's poetic language with ease.

— Maria Vokic



Catherine Curtin and Beth Hart as the private and public Janises.

rocker/goddess sacrificed herself in front of an enraptured audience. Directed by Randal Myler, *Love, Janis* is a bio-musical bordering on Greek tragedy, that ancient contest that awarded a goat to the person who told the best tale. And what a tale — *Janis* needed three actresses to tell it!

Due to the vocal (and physical) demands, the title role was shared: Beth Hart and Andra C. Mitrovich alternated performances as "Janis-The Public Singer," while Catherine Curtin portrayed "Janis-The Private Person." The phenomenal Hart (whose performance I saw) captured Joplin's raw energy and