

Dream-drenched fantasy fuses 'Heliotrope Bouquet'

By CHRIS SCHNEIDER

Eric Overmyer's music-drama "The Heliotrope Bouquet by Scott Joplin & Louis Chauvin" may not be "audible poetry in motion," exactly, to use one of its more frequently-repeated phrases. What "Heliotrope," a coproduction of the La Jolla Playhouse and Baltimore's Center Stage which will play at UCSD's Mandell Weiss Forum through Sept. 15, is nice to look at and literate and atmospheric and intelligent — as well as a great arguer on the behalf of author Overmyer for those less than convinced by his "On the Verge" or his "Don Quixote de La Jolla."

Famous composer Scott Joplin (played at the Forum by John Cothran Jr.) and ill-schooled, virtually-forgotten pianist Louis Chauvin (Victor Mack) collaborated on a piano rag entitled "The Heliotrope Bouquet." The show at the Mandell Weiss Forum, which started life as a libretto for composer Roger Trefousse and at present is directed (beautifully) by Stan Wojewodski Jr., presents us with Joplin at the end of his ca-

reer, when his body was wracked with the syphilis contracted in early bordello days and when he labored to finish his opera "Treemonisha." It's a dream play, one which starts out with a literal dream of "Bacchae"-like women descending a wrought-iron staircase and is filled with visions from Joplin's earlier life. It's also a meditation on two different kinds of artists — Joplin, who planned his career; Chauvin, who created simply because he created — and their contrasting approaches to their art.

The antecedents for "Heliotrope" are fairly clear, from the dying-artist-visited-by-his-younger-days stuff (John Huston's film "Moulin Rouge") to the contrasting of Chauvin and Joplin (Jeremy Paul Kagen's television movie "Scott Joplin"). There's also a lot of Strindberg's "Ghost Sonata" and "Dream Play" to its interpenetration of dream and reality. This fluid, unpredictable reality quotient in "Heliotrope" is exciting, though: in its two different versions of a



From left to right, Dennis Diggs, (Felicity), Keith Randolph Smith, (Turpin), Louis Chauvin, (Victor Mack), and Linda Cavell, (Hannah) perform in The La Jolla Playhouse' presentation of *The Heliotrope Bouquet*.

brothel piano contest (led by Keith Randolph Smith as Turpin); in the way Joplin's second wife, Lottie (Judyann Elder), melts into his lost first, Belle (also played by Elder); in the variously encouraging and dismissive versions of Joplin's own "white man," his publisher Stark (F. William Parker); and in the way the reappearance of Joplin's lost "Guest of Honor"

opera and, if he's to be believed, his daughter are shown to be a diseased man's wishful fantasy.

Reports of the Baltimore production made it sound as if Chauvin's character outweighed Joplin's (ever the problem when Creative Instinct talks back, in a play, to Dutiful Planning) or that the show lacked visual interest. Please see THEATRE, C4



Actors Louis Chauvin, (Victor), and Scott Joplin, (John), write "The Heliotrope Bouquet," ragtime's sweet, sassy anthem while remembering turn-of-the-century life.

THEATRE

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after those initial descending women. Mack's mercurial tenor presence balances Cothran's solid bass one very nicely, however. There are also many arresting images: what happens to the baby in Belle's arms; the no-longer-attached streamers; what we can glimpse in the mirror. If there's a problem, and it's not a big one, it's the distinguishing between heightened verbal arias and everyday talk; Joplin's calling out for "Coffee, black as fever, please!" is just a trifle much.

Cothran and Mack are very persuasive. So, too, is Elder in her vocal and physical differentiating between Belle and Lottie (embodiments of poetry vs. prose, wishes vs. mundane reality?). Ellen M. Bethea's freshness as Spice, the hired girl whom Joplin mistakes for his daughter, is appealing. The contained fatuousness that Parker brings to Stark, the not-yet-excessive silliness of his performance, is just right. Smith, SaMi Chester, and Robert A. Owens are also very enjoyable in the sporting-house sequence.

The look of "Heliotrope," with its sunlight seeping through the louvers and the turquoise floor of its House of Blue Lights and its female chorus in dusty off-white and its snakey dance movements glimpsed through a semi-transparent curtain, is splendid, a turn-of-the-century Jugendstil delight. Costume designer Catherine Zuber, set designer Christopher

Barreca, and (especially) lighting designer Richard Pilbrow deserve ample praise. So do the combined efforts of music director Dwight Andrews and sound designer Janet Kalas, notably in their distorting and reproducing of the show's piano music.

The balancing of this play's non-verbal and verbal music is a tricky task which director Wojewodski manages very neatly. The results are dreamily pleasing, as are the movements which he and choreographer Donald Byrd devise for the players.

Don't be put off by pronouncements that "Heliotrope" is "too much like a poem or a song" — a description which sounds like the speaker has little notion of either — to be appreciated as biography. Don't, too, feel too compelled to cast your vote for either Joplin or Chauvin, worrying about who "takes care of business" or doesn't; the two of them are opposing portions of the artistic temperament. That's the point of the final image: Joplin at the keys, Chauvin sitting on top of the piano, "Heliotrope Bouquet" playing in the background. The