

Scott Joplin in 1917, near his own death at age 49, with his disintegrating mind replaying fragmentary memories that center around the younger man, who had died nine years earlier, only 27 years old. The scene fluctuates phantasmagorically from a rooming house in Harlem to a dreamily recalled New Orleans whorehouse, and locations in St. Louis and Chicago, in no chronological order.

The production, under Stan Wojewodski Jr.'s direction, is lusciously gorgeous. Christopher Barreca's magnificent set design—with its appropriately-hued, diaphanous drapes; its decaying jalousied walls; its huge, ornamental iron spiral staircase—seamlessly serves all the vague, feverish locales. Richard Pilbrow illuminates it in a rich chiaroscuro haze; Catherine Zuber's costumes are the epitome of shine and sparkle. The sound design is by Janet Kalas, the music director is Dwight Andrews, and the slight choreography was done by Donald Byrd.

The players are equal to their stylish surroundings. June Jones, Linda Cavell, Ellen M. Bethea and Denise Diggs make a ravishing quartet of flighty and quite fantastical dreamgirls—representatives of all the women of pleasure whom Joplin and his associates may have known. Judyann Elder cycles instantly between being both of Joplin's wives (in his terminal daze he can't really distinguish them anymore) as well as doing a flamboyant turn as one Spanish Mary. SaMi Chester, Robert A. Owens, and Keith Randolph Smith make distinct and memorably vital impressions as Joplin's gleefully competitive fellow musicians. And F. William Parker is wry and genial as Joplin's publisher, Stark.

The Heliotrope Bouquet by Scott Joplin & Louis Chauvin

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"Success and failure," said Tennessee Williams, "are equally disastrous." Eric Overmyer's play, *The Heliotrope Bouquet* by Scott Joplin & Louis Chauvin—which, in its poetic extravagance of language and impressionistic techniques, shares some attractive qualities with Williams' work—could employ that aphorism for an epigraph. Taken to mean that the ultimate limits of success, particularly in art, can lead to personal consequences as disastrous as failure, then the short life of Scott Joplin and the even shorter life of his brief collaborator Louis Chauvin serve as sad illustrations of the apophthegm.

Both men were successful African-American ragtime musicians who enjoyed fleeting fame at the turn of the century. The idiom soon enough passed from popularity, but Joplin's reputation has since enjoyed a sturdy posthumous revival thanks to the delicate strength and grace of his little compositions (as charming and musical as Strauss waltzes and polkas or Chopin mazurkas and polonaises). Chauvin, however, though perhaps at least the musical equal of Joplin (according to Overmyer's story), left no legacy, being compositionally illiterate, save for the one piece composed with Joplin's assistance.

This is the basis of the play's elegaic tone. There is even a touch of Milton's *Lycidas* and a hint of Gray's *Elegy* about it, with the theme of the premature, obscure death of a promising artist together with the hope for art's eternization. Overmyer shows us



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As the two doomed ragtimers, Victor Mack and John Cothran Jr. make a sort of grasshopper and ant partnership: Mack's Louis Chauvin elegantly ephemeral and epicurian, Cothran's earnest, confused Scott Joplin diligently assisting from the sidelines. Indeed, Cothran does well in a difficult central role that requires him to be more or less a passive and impotent observer of his own fading memories and imaginings. Overmyer's script is strong on poignance and poetry (particularly in one brilliant sequence where the vying musicians represent their music through speeches) with only episodic flashes of what could be called drama. Cothran, as well as the others, delivers the poetic language with feeling. Since the play is swift and short (only about 80 minutes with no break), the lack of any real narrative dynamics does not have time to become tedious. They make their meiodious impressions and quietly depart.

—G. Weinberger-Harter