

Theater: 'Lady Lester'

By MEL GUSSOW

The tenor saxophonist Lester Young was a legendary pioneer of modern jazz, an individualist who was unable to compromise either in his music or in his attitude toward those who could control his destiny. The story of Young, the "Prez" — the president of saxophonists — is the provocative subject of Oyama's play "The Resurrection of Lady Lester," which opened last night at the Manhattan Theater Club.

The "lady" of the title refers to one of Young's poetic habits. Just as George Balanchine feels that dance is a woman, Young apotheosized jazz as a lady. As he says in the play, "Anybody with music in their souls is a lady." Hence, his friend Billie Holiday became, in his words, "Lady Day."

When the play was first presented last season in the Yale Repertory Theater's Winterfest of new works in progress, it was the highlight of the festival — the dramatic equivalent of an extended jazz riff, improvisations on the theme of Young. It had a loose-limbed lyrical quality and was on its way to becoming an illuminating look at an archetypal black musician.

In its first full production, under the direction of Andre Mtumi, "Lady Lester" takes a step backward. Though some of the play's strengths are still evident — the homely, hipster poetry by the gifted playwright and the music provided by Dwight Andrews, with occasional lyrics by the author — something essential is off-key.

We never have a feeling, as we did at Yale, that Young was a man of creative, perhaps even heroic, stature. The revised version of the play skirts the musician's success and focuses too much on his fall. He becomes pathetic rather than tragic, and the turning point, his abusive military experience,

The Cast

THE RESURRECTION OF LADY LESTER, by Oyama; directed by Andre Mtumi; set design, Kate Edmunds; costume design, Rifa Ryack; lighting design, William Armstrong; production stage manager, Alan Fox; musical direction, original compositions and arrangements by Dwight Andrews. Presented by the Manhattan Theater Club, Lynne Meadow, artistic director, and Barry Grove, managing director. At the Manhattan Theater Club, UpStage, 321 East 73d Street.

WITH: Cleavon Little, Randy Denson, Carol-Jean Lewis, Otis Young-Smith, Arthur French, Yvette Hawkins, Obeke Adedunyo and Larry Bryggman.

MUSICIANS:

Saxophone	Dwight Andrews
Piano	Paul Sullivan
Percussion	Pheeroan akLaff
Bass	Michael Logan

is not adequately explored.

The problem is less one of script than of production. Totally recasting the play, Mr. Mtumi has given it a cabaret-or jazz club-style staging — in itself not a bad idea. However, he is unable to integrate the work's three basic elements: time present, Young's dying in 1959 in a seedy hotel room; flashbacks to ghosts in his past; and the music.

In Mr. Mtumi's awkward staging, many of the scenes begin at the rear of the stage behind transparent panels. It is as if we are watching drama under glass. The play starts with Young (Cleavon Little) stumbling into his hotel room — ironically across the street from Birdland, where he had his greatest success — and collapsing not on a bed, but, in this overly spare staging, on a small hard bench standing in for a bed. He then walks to the front of the stage and leads us languidly through his memories and dreams.

He takes us back to his camptown band boyhood and his nights on the road with fellow jazzmen. In performance, these scenes — demonstrating the anarchic vitality of youth — lose their flavor. The play is not a comedy, but it has — or had — moments of leavening lightness, obscured in the current production. Mr. Little, who has been so amusing in comic roles, plays many of his scenes in a doleful manner. In contrast to his Yale predecessor, Darryl Croxton, he does not convey the saxophonist's exultation in his music.

The star is surrounded with performers who are if anything less winning. Carol-Jean Lewis has an extremely grating voice and is instantly identifiable as she changes wigs to play several women in Young's life. Larry Bryggman is annoyingly loud and abrasive in the overwritten role of a manager. As Young's father and sideman, Arthur French is the only supporting actor to emerge with credit from the production.

To appreciate the true nature of the play, so muted in Mr. Mtumi's production, we have to listen to the vibrant four-piece jazz combo led by Mr. Andrews and to Young's musings — for example, his wistful comment that as a "sad nomad" on the road, "the only life we have is the next place."