Too Late the Heliotrope

BY JEFF SMITH

The first two plays at the new Mandell Weiss Forum have been about the creation of an art work. Lee Blessing's *Fortinbras* concluded with the mysterious appearance of the text for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, implying that somehow a conflation of eccentric Elsinore ghosts produced it. Eric Overmyer's *Heliotrope Bouquet by Scott Joplin and Louis Chauvin*, currently in its West Coast première at the Forum, is about the creation of "The Heliotrope Bouquet," a ragtime two-step Joplin and Chauvin co-composed in Chicago in 1906. *Fortinbras* and *Heliotrope* have other similarities, not the least of which is that their trees are much more interesting than their forest.

According to Overmyer, Chauvin wrote the middle of the song first; then Joplin wrote the beginning and the ending. Whether or not this was true in actuality, it fits the characters — as the playwright has conceived them — quite well. Chauvin, who died of syphilis at 26, was always in the middle, fully engaged in the present moment. It was said that, like Mozart, he could hear a tune once and play it back note for note. He was also illiterate, verbally and musically, and paid no heed to posterity. "The Heliotrope Bouquet" is the only work of his ever published, and he died in complete obscurity. Joplin, by contrast, always has "one eye on the future." He's obsessed with endings — with fame, with his career, and with the fate of ragtime. His ideal is a "sweet resolution." He's his own PR firm, always calculating schemes for advancing his renown. The most conspicuous of these is his title, "the king of ragtime." But in ways that recall Shakespeare's King Henry IV, who wore the crown uneasily because he won it by illegitimate means, Joplin knows in his heart that the real king of ragtime was Chauvin.

With the failure of his second ragtime opera, *Treemonisha*, which he produced at considerable expense in 1911, it is said that Joplin became moody and temperamental. In 1916 he was confined to the Manhattan State Hospital, where he died the following year. *Heliotrope* begins in the last hours of Joplin's life. His fame has fled. His mind is almost gone. Through the distorting lenses of memory and dream, Joplin relives his past. He recalls his days in the House of Blue Light, a "sporting house" in New Orleans, at the turn of the century; at the Rosebud Cafe in St. Louis in 1905; and in a Chicago opium den composing "The Heliotrope Bouquet" with Chauvin. In these recollections that intertwine, dreamlike, Joplin rarely takes center stage. Instead it is Chauvin, who "died like a dog and lived worse," who stands in the middle of Joplin's reveries, winning "cutting" contests on the piano with effortless ease and refusing to promote his talent, which keeps the dreaming Joplin in a state of perplexity.

Denise Diggs, Keith Randolph Smith, Victor Mack, Linda Cavell

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Overmyer's opposition between Chauvin and Joplin recalls the ways Shakespeare and Ben Jonson were often regarded: Shakespeare a "natural genius" who seemingly didn't care a whit for fame; Jonson a rule-riddled plodder ever eager to advance his literary position. Like Jonson and Joplin, *Heliotrope* is also obsessed with what the Bard called "the bubble reputation." The play raises valid concerns: why is someone as great as Chauvin completely forgotten; how many unsung Miltons *are* out there; and just how much should one covet being a blurb in — the repository of the famous — an encyclopedia? More to the point, the play touches on the plight of African-American artists in this country (and the fact that the ruling orthodoxy of any society ultimately determines who will be remembered and who forgotten). The questions are many. The problem with the play is that these abstract ruminations are stuffed into a context, an illogically logical dreamscape, that is unsuited for rational speculation. Thus they stick out — as if they carried signs that read "author's message" — and get in the way of what the play does well.

The Heliotrope Bouquet is being staged by the La Jolla Playhouse as part of the much-appreciated "AT&T New Plays for the '90s" series. Both the play and the production are on much firmer ground, ironically, when they evoke the evanescence of dreams and the inner life of music. Overmyer and director Stu Wojewodski, Jr., have found many verbal and visual correlatives for ragtime music. This enables us to see and hear it through different means at the same time. When playing the piano, for example, the characters speak poetic equivalents. Their language rides with the music and often fuses with it spectacularly. Aided by choreographer Donald Byrd, Wojewodski fills the stage with visually arresting images: the vision of five women wearing ethereally white dresses, making a spiraling descent down a wrought-iron staircase; multicolored Mardi Gras streamers pouring down like waterfalls; and always elements from one recollection suddenly appearing — as dreams are wont to do — in another and prompting rich metaphoric associations. The sheer theatricality of the Playhouse production is splendid. When *Heliotrope* literally becomes its subject, it is a fascinating dance/theater dream-piece. When it is merely about its subject, however, it is far less compelling.

Much credit for the production's atmosphere must go to the designers. Christopher Barreca's set — a wood floor given a blue glaze, louvered doors on the rear wall that allow slits of light to streak through, the large staircase — converts easily into a landscape of reverie. This is a nocturnal world, even at mid-day, and Richard Pilbrow's excellent lighting underscores this point at every turn, as does a huge, canopy-like curtain that can surround the entire thrust stage at the Mandell Weiss Forum. Catherine Zuber's fine costumes pinpoint time and place and, when necessary, can be timeless as well. And part of Janet Kalas' sound design and Dwight Andrews' musical direction is a piano that moves and plays on its own accord. The piano not only contributes to the overall impression of a dream world; it also solves what could have been a serious problem — how to get actors who can't play the piano to look like they can. The answer? Finger-sync.

While *The Heliotrope Bouquet* is concerned with the fate of individual artists, the action in the La Jolla Playhouse production is ensemble all the way. Often the five women from the sporting house will move, hauntingly, as one, and the acting in general has a consistently stylized flair that matches Overmyer's verbal riffs of dialogue. John Cothran, Jr., is solid as a Joplin now past the fame that Chauvin never had. Victor Mack is equally strong as the obviously talented, indifferent Chauvin, who tried through opium to make life a perpetual Christmas. Judyann Elder has been given one of the play's most difficult tasks; she plays the three women in Joplin's life, often having to switch from one to the other in an instant. No problem for this gifted actress. With the exception of F. William Parker — who can't seem to decide if his character, Joplin's publisher, is an ally of the musician or a rip-off artist — the rest of the cast does substantial work in a production that is at its best when doing insubstantial things.

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Next week: Hugh Whitemore's *Breaking the Code*, about the enigmatic Alan Turing, the man who cracked the Nazis' Enigma Code in World War II, is being well served at the North Coast Repertory Theatre.