

Stanley Kauffmann

Piaf in Bits and Pieces

One of the great romances in Western history is the theater's love affair with itself. Since Aristophanes, the theater has been addicted to plays about how important, wonderful, and glamorous it is; and as the centuries have twirled along to our day, that reflexive love has embraced entertainers as well as actors. The latest "affair" is *Piaf*, a play by Pam Gems about the French singer who was in fact a genius of pop. *Piaf* is also one more of another curious breed, the show that asks a performer to perform like a famous star: Bessie Smith, Fats Waller, and the Marx Brothers are others who have

lately had their impersonators on Broadway.

Pam Gems is English and has had one previous play produced here, off Broadway at the Manhattan Theater Club, *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*, which I thought fairly static. It meant to show the struggle for liberation of four young London women today, and three of them stayed the same throughout. *Piaf* is certainly not static; and show-biz adulation though it is, it too seems designed to show a woman's struggles in a world dominated by men. Its first trouble is that, as an example of a woman's struggle against male domi-

nation, Edith Piaf is a poor choice. She had gifts that would have made her outstanding in an Amazon society, and she was so active sexually that it's hard to think of her as being exploited sexually by males. True, early in life she was reputed to be a prostitute, a male-oriented trade, but there's no indication that she was much less promiscuous when she wasn't for hire.

The play's muzziness continues. *Piaf* was first done in London—by now almost a routine comment for serious plays on Broadway—the star is English, and the dialogue, which is gamy, is in Cockney to suggest the street argot of

Paris. At first this seems even more apt for America because it makes the play sound foreign at the same time that it's comprehensible; but then Piaf sings most of her many songs in French, which leaves us with madly mixed conventions.

The script itself is a surfboard ride over a complex life: from the streets of a working-class quarter to cafes, then stardom and adulation and international tours and international friends, through husbands (several) and lovers (who's counting?), to a finish in drugs and disease at the age of 48 in 1963. (I read her biography some years ago and was especially struck by the fact that, even toward the end, racked and maimed, she drew young men both in

MARTHA SWOPE



From left: Zoë Wanamaker, Lewis Arlt, Jane Lapotaire, and Michael Ayr in Pam Gems's *Piaf*.

sex and devotion.) Gems's play skims the story so synoptically that all the characters other than Piaf—and one lifelong pal, a woman who whored with her—are like props for the star. The play runs over two hours, but it has the texture of a skit.

Now even this effect, like the use of Cockney, might have turned out well: a play with the shape and speed of a cabaret skit about the life of a cabaret performer. This reinforcement of content by form seems intentional: The stage holds a large raked platform; behind it sit the three musicians who accompany and set moods; bits of furniture are placed and removed, with most of the "scene design" done by lighting; around the platform sit the actors who, other than Piaf and pal, all play many parts. Further to the cabaret mode, the director Howard Davies has paced the piece with egregious pizzazz and often has the actors play front. I don't merely mean they face front: They "take" front—they show their reactions, like vaudevillians, to an audience they know is watching. And the life-as-show feeling is heightened by the free-form neon light over the playing area that changes from red to blue at peak moments.

But this idea—mimesis of the story by the form of the play—is done so breathlessly fast that it never breathes: It's a whiz-past of mannequins. And two other troubles weaken it further. First, that star-imitation syndrome. Jane Lapotaire, the English actress who did the part in London and does it again here, knows that she's no Piaf and has said so, but disclaimers are no help. The play is built around a lot of Piaf's performing, and that performing has to be what everyone on stage says it is or the whole thing's down the drain. If Lapotaire were anything like as good a singer as Piaf, she wouldn't be playing Piaf, she would be Lapotaire. It's not a criticism of Lapotaire to say that she's not Piaf: But it was a mistake to center so much of the show on her singing. As for her acting, that made me a bit uneasy, too. Lapotaire, a scrawny little woman physically right for Piaf, commits herself to the role in a way that suggests immersion rather than acting, more an induced self-deception than

imaginative recreation. It's the way Will Geer used to do Robert Frost or the way Liza Minnelli keeps trying to do her mother. There is no edge, no view of the part, which good actors give us at their most convincing. It's almost like watching a nut case instead of an actor. If Lapotaire had been playing a fictitious or nonfamous performer, there might have been more acting and less intoxication.

And then there's that theater self-love. A lot of the play, as it goes on, is about going on: how much every performance takes out of a real performer, how little the audience knows or cares. Why the hell should we care? It's a bit like the president of the United States complaining about the burdens of office after he has fought to get in. But in a quite different way, the audience

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does care. The Star's Ordeal, in itself sentimental self-aggrandizement, has become the great fake agon of our time, a way for the viewer to go through catharsis on the cheap, without any real self-rolling, with plentiful caressing of frustrations. (For two hours, you too, John or Mary Bloggs, can know what it feels like to be a star.)

But there's something deeper, more important, in *Piaf* that holds an audience. I'm not predicting its success, though it was one in London, only commenting on what I saw and felt when I was there. To explain, I go back a step.

Despite the Broadway box-office boom, there's much talk these days about the end of the theater, not the usual facile gloom (of which the theater has always been secretly proud because the gloom was always proved false), but the aesthetic finish lying ahead of it because of technology. A talented actor told me lately of advice from one of the most active theater figures in New York: Get prominent as fast as you can

because in 10 years it will all be cable television and they'll want names. One of our few intelligent theater critics, Gordon Rogoff, has commented comparably on the theater's future after seeing preparations for a TV-tape of an opera—preparations far beyond any theater's means.

Saturnine though I am, I doubt the completeness of these predictions, and the *Piaf* production is one reason why. Its audience was getting something it liked and can't get elsewhere. I don't mean live actors: I've doubted the indispensability of "liveness" ever since I began to understand a bit about film. I mean intrinsic and inseparable theatrical form.

If you go to see *Lunch Hour*, the Jean Kerr bore now on Broadway, you sit in front of something—an awkwardly designed Long Island beach house with script and performance to match—that you'll be able to see again in a few years at your local movie house and a few years after that on your TV screen at home. The other media will require only a little adaptation, nothing fundamental: *Lunch Hour*, more or less as it is, can be done on stage or screen or TV. Not *Piaf*. It could exist only in a theater: with its bare platform, its continually flexed and unrealistic lighting, its actors waiting in view, changing clothes for different characters in view, its musicians waiting and playing in view. Now any experienced playgoer will recognize that all of this is highly unoriginal but will also see that it couldn't happen anywhere but in a theater. (The few exceptions—some of Fellini's films, for instance—are exceptions.)

The audience at *Piaf* likes the show's reliance on its imaginative collaboration. The challenges to imagination here are hardly deep or new: They are aimed at the center of a soft viewer's soft daring. But they couldn't be issued anywhere but in a theater; and they give the audience, unconsciously, some feeling of stretch, of adventure, of accomplishment. *Piaf* itself is only a failed tease of a play about a bawdy humane genius, but at least the production does move toward one aspect of the theater's uniqueness, the selfhood—under the smarmy self-love—that is possibly the theater's best life insurance. ■

Stephen Wadsworth

Discovering Janáček's Operas

Several years ago I read, back to back, *Alive!*, the story of the Andes survivors, and *Watership Down*, a novel of rabbits holding their own in the open. I was struck by their bond as life-affirming tales of survival. In one week recently I heard recordings of Leós Janáček's operas **From the House of the Dead**, a shattering view of life in a prison camp, and **The Cunning Little Vixen**, whose theme—the blessed regeneration of nature—rises like the moon from simple scenes of a fox's living and dying. These operas, like those books so different in form and content, also celebrate life similarly.

Janáček (1854-1928), Moravian composer, conductor, teacher, student of the music of speech patterns and of the sounds of nature, was a humanist and an optimist who found in opera the form in which he could most richly express his deep love of life and people. Despite, or maybe because of the tragic deaths of both his children (aged 8 and 21) and an increasingly cold marriage, this man smiled radiantly at life, for all its frowns. Life went on, offering him new glories. In most of his operas, boundless happiness is achieved—even if fleetingly—only in the wake of death and dying.

Janáček's musical themes, based on the short phrases of Czech folk music and his own brusque dialect, are brief. His constant repetition and permutation of terse fragments of melody tease, even torture the ear. He lets you have a flood of lyricism but then brutally halts it with gnarled rhythmic twists and contrasting themes, pulling something vital out from under you. These flash floods give you the feeling that you can never

quite grasp the truth or purity of an emotion for more than a few seconds—as in life. Too bad Janáček never went through with his thoughts of capturing Tolstoy's flighty, impulsive Anna Karenina in an opera.

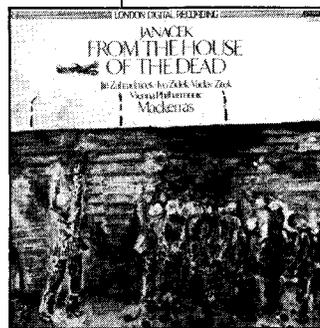
He wrote nine operas, most of them available on Supraphon Records with seasoned casts of Czech singers. Many of these singers appear in London Records' unfolding series of Janáček operas—this one centered around a leading Janáčekian, Sir Charles Mackerras, who conducts the Vienna Philharmonic. Recently the operas have been staged in extensive cycles in

In *Jenůfa* (2-Angel, S-3756, \$19.96). In *Jenůfa*, composed 1893-1903, the most widely produced of his operas, it is the revelation of her baby's murder that opens the heroine's eyes to a truer love and brighter future than she has ever known. Nowhere in Janáček is that feeling of *almost* grasping beauty and truth so viscerally, so disturbingly omnipresent. Supraphon, with whom Angel shares rights to this recording, has published in Europe a more recent recording of *Jenůfa* with the sensational Gabriela Benackova, whose rich, soft-grained voice is more smoothly produced than most Slavic sopranos'.

That set probably will be released here within the year; meanwhile Angel's Czech cast is powerful.

So is London's on the new recording of *House*, composed 1927-1928, a dense but tuneful score clarified by the digital process. Here, cries of hurt, pain, delirium, and eventually death are juxtaposed

with sarcastic, folksy reminiscences of crime. When a prisoner and a wounded eagle are freed at the end, the other prisoners can dream—but only for fleeting minutes before they are marched back to brutality and nothingness. Janáček's inscription? "In every creature a spark of God." In *Vixen* (2-Supraphon 112 1181-2, \$19.96), composed 1924, Janáček "wedded my muse to the shadow of a forest and the miracle of dawn," and the result is erotic and moving. Bohumil Gregor's warm conducting draws exceptional performances out of only adequate singers. Supraphon provides no English translation, but Erik Chisholm's *The Operas of Janáček* (Pergamon Press, \$9.75) offers detailed commentary. ■



Prague, Düsseldorf, Cardiff, and London, and at least five of them are repertoire pieces around the world. The New York City Opera performs *The Cunning Little Vixen* and *The Makropoulos Affair* this month. London Records, working backwards through Janáček's operas, has started with *Katya Kabanova*, *The Makropoulos Affair*, and now—digitally recorded—*From the House of the Dead*. Last month London taped *Vixen* with Lucia Popp, for release early next year.

I also worked backwards, from the last opera on the latest recording, *House* (2-London LDR 10036, \$21.96)—following Janáček's ever keener and more eccentrically precise dramatic imagination back to its first flowering