

'Love, Janis' grabs a piece of our hearts

By Robert Hurwitt
CHRONICLE THEATER CRITIC

The resemblance is as uncanny as an aural acid flashback. Lean, lovely Cathy Richardson, the singer in "Love, Janis," looks nothing like Janis Joplin, though she embodies many of the rock diva's mannerisms perfectly. But when Richardson pours her magnificent, flexible voice into one of Joplin's signature numbers — tearing off a rousing "Piece of My Heart," a steaming "Summertime" or an impossibly energetic "Ball and Chain" — the experience is more like hearing Janis live than any recording ever captured.

At such times, Randal Myler's biographical musical feels like a welcome, long-overdue homecoming for the self-styled "beatnik" refugee from Port Arthur, Texas, who made rock-blues history in San Francisco. It has taken a long time to get here, but the show that opened Sunday at Marines Memorial Theatre is, for the most part, well worth the wait.

The portrait of the artist, drawn from her own words, is refreshingly laced with candid humor, engaging and at times quite touching. The 17 songs — performed at alternating shows by Richardson and Katrina Chester — generate the electrifying exhilaration of one of Joplin's own concerts throughout the first act and at times during the second. At its best, "Janis" re-creates the vitality of her astonishingly brief late-'60s career; she died from a heroin overdose at 27 in 1970.

Inspired by sister Laura Joplin's book of the same title, adapter-director Myler ("Hank Williams: Lost Highway") created the text from letters Janis wrote home and from interviews. The show opened in '94 in Denver and has played many other towns since, including a two-year stint in New York.

If it's surprising that it has taken so long to come to the place where it takes place, it also makes sense. A San Francisco audience might be as extra-critical as nostalgic, given how many of us have vivid memories of the singer at



Laura Morton / The Chronicle

Cathy Richardson may not look like Janis Joplin, but she assumes her mannerisms superbly in the musical biography "Love, Janis."

REVIEW



Love, Janis: Musical biography. Written and directed by Randal Myler. (Through Sept. 3. Marines Memorial Theatre, 609 Sutter St., San Francisco. Two hours, 20 minutes. Tickets \$35-\$67. Call (415) 771-6900 or visit www.ticketmaster.com.)

the height of her meteoric career. The opening-night crowd proved enthusiastically supportive, applauding mentions of the late Chet Helms (who guided her early career), cheering the familiar opening chords of Joplin's greatest hits, roaring at the conclusion of Richardson's most dynamic numbers, boisterously singing along to "Mercedes Benz" and rising for a prolonged standing ovation.

Much of the show warrants

such enthusiasm. The stylings are period perfect under the music direction of Sam Andrew, a founding member of Big Brother and the Holding Company who'd arranged many of the tunes for Joplin in the first place. A first-rate band — led by pyrotechnic lead guitarist Joel Hoekstra — performs with the take-no-prisoners intensity of Big Brother at its best, as Andrew's arrangements reflect the evolution of Joplin's style.

A sweet, subtly complex Morgan Hallett plays the principal speaking Janis, delivering the texts of the letters with affecting emotional honesty and playing verbal duets with the singer in answering the questions of the invisible interviewer (Michael Santo). Lorraine Venberg's costumes trace the era's styles from Janis' jeans-and-T-shirt arrival through the high-hippie flowering of her beads, bracelets, fringe, satin and

feathered-hair-ornaments glory.

Norman Schwab's terrific projections replicate the explosive growth of the light-show art form, borrowing images from pioneer Bill Ham. Posters from Helms' Family Dog and Avalon Ballroom festoon Schwab's set, along with projected family photos from Janis' childhood and images of San Francisco in the '60s. The first act, tracing her rise to local stardom and national breakthrough at the '67 Monterey Pop Festival, plays with rock-out force.

Richardson doesn't quite go to the vocal-cord-lacerating extremes of which Joplin was capable. But she comes close enough. Belting "Piece of My Heart," Big Mama Thornton's "Ball and Chain" or Joplin's own "Down on Me," she captures not only the explosive phrasings and go-for-broke wails — hopping up and down, one leg jerking up as if to force the last shred of song from her gut — but also the impression Joplin gave that she was a force of nature bursting its limits through willpower alone.

Richardson's breathtakingly beautiful "Summertime" and tear-down-the-walls "Ball and Chain" bring the first act to a finish that seems impossible to top. Unfortunately, that's true. In the second half, which follows Janis through her break with Big Brother, height of stardom and increasing drug and alcohol problems, the song-letter-song-interview-song pattern becomes tiresomely predictable. The spoken segments, though affectingly depicted, don't tell the story in much interesting detail or deepen our sense of who Joplin was.

The music isn't as exciting, either, though Richardson is achingly expressive on "Me and Bobby McGee," and she and the band bring the show to a full-tilt, foot-stomping finale with "Move Over" and "Get It While You Can." Even in its less invigorating second act, you know "Janis" has got it when it makes you feel good.

E-mail Robert Hurwitt at rhurwitt@sfchronicle.com.