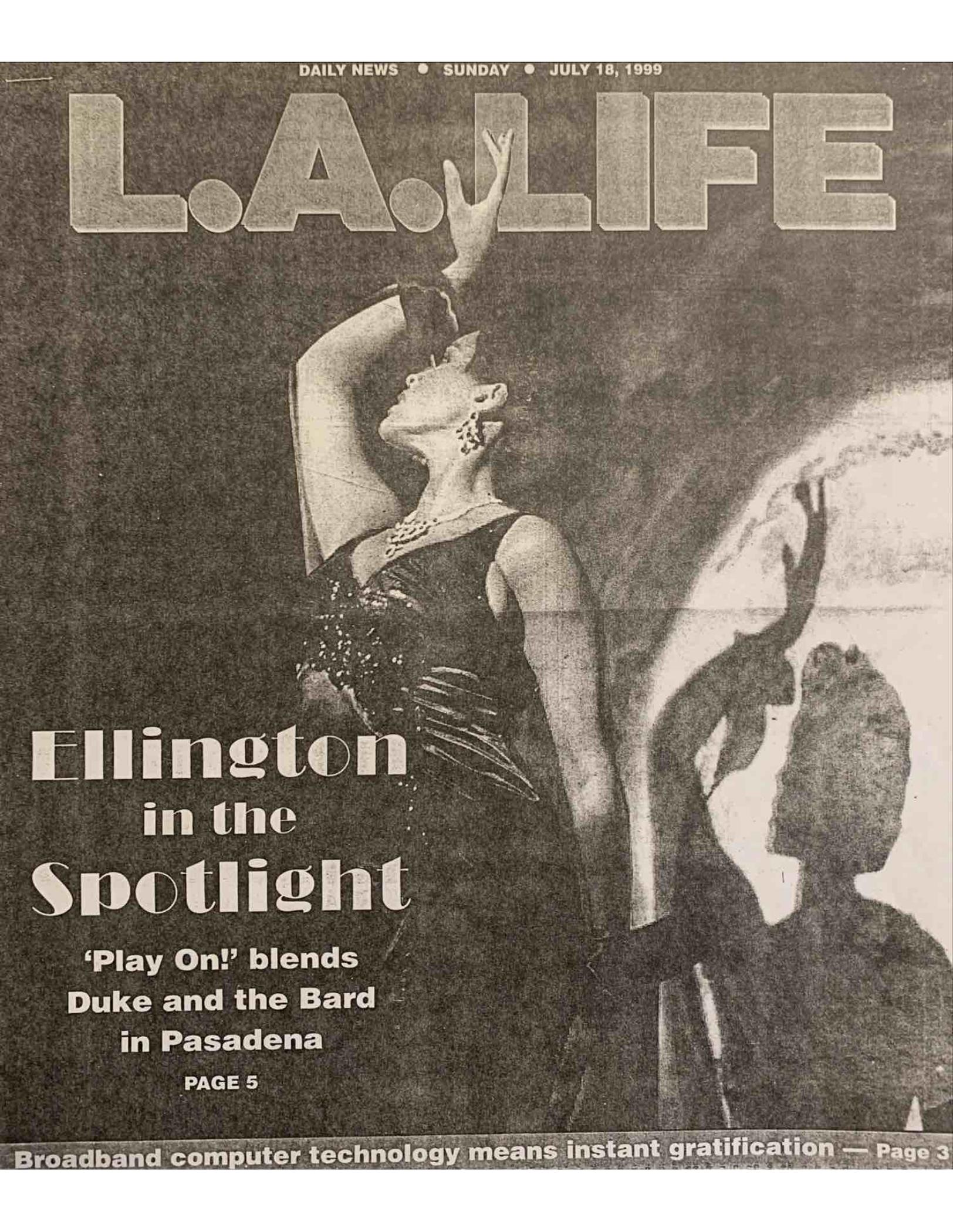


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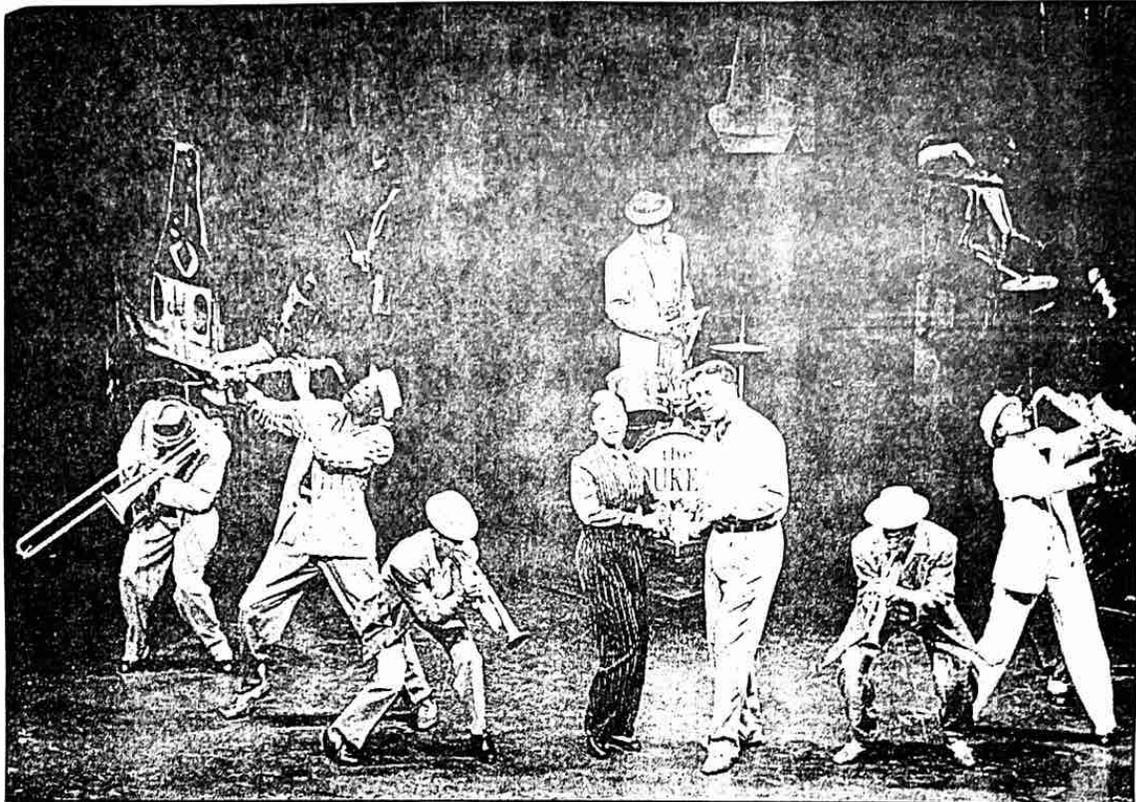


Ellington in the Spotlight

**'Play On!' blends
Duke and the Bard
in Pasadena**

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Broadband computer technology means instant gratification — Page 3



Josh Estey/Staff Photographer

The cast of "Play On!" performs "Hit Me With a Hot Note" during the Pasadena Playhouse production that blends the music of Duke Ellington and the milieu of 1940s Harlem with the plot of William Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night."

By Evan Henerson
Staff Writer

Think you're a Dukeophile? A true Ellingtonian? Not so fast, baby. The catalog of the works of Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington is believed to contain somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 pieces of music—although only about 1,012 are copyrighted. How many can you name?

Cover story

"The Smithsonian is still working on the catalog," says Ellington's granddaughter, Mercedes, a New York choreographer who has spent the past several weeks in Pasadena. "He wrote on shirt-sleeves and things."

From that catalog list, director Sheldon Epps determined that his idea to create an Ellington-inspired adaptation of William Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" wasn't as crazy as it might first have seemed. "Play On!" which opens tonight at the Pasadena Playhouse, contains more than 20 Ellington songs, including "Mood Indigo," "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing," "Don't Get Around Much Anymore" and "Rocks in My Bed."

The story is essentially Shakespeare's tale, updated to swinging 1940s Harlem. An aspiring songwriter, Vy, puts on male clothes to penetrate the court of a famous composer and ends up falling in love with him. The composer pines for the elusive songstress,

The Duke and the Bard

Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night' meets Ellington's musical genius in 'Play On!'

Lady Liv, and sends his new page (now called Vy-Man) to woo her on his behalf. The title "Play On!" comes from the first line of "Twelfth Night."

If you're expecting the poetry of Shakespeare's language, look elsewhere. This free adaptation, by playwright Cheryl West, dispenses with certain characters and alters the plot. If there's a dominant voice, it's Ellington's. "Play On!" is as much a tribute to dominant musical figures of the time: Ellington, Sarah Vaughan, Cab Calloway—who were models for the play's central

characters. It's no coincidence that Vy's love interest, Harlem's reigning man of music, is called simply "Duke."

And, yes, the marriage of a 16th-century British poet/playwright and a legendary Washington, D.C.-born jazzman has possibilities, says the man who facilitated this union.

"There was a lot of synchronicity to this idea that wasn't readily apparent," said Epps. "I always say there must be some natural connection between a playwright who would write, 'If music be the food of love, play on!'

The facts

- **What:** "Play On!"
- **Where:** Pasadena Playhouse, 39 S. El Molino Ave.
- **When:** Opens today. Performances at 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 5 and 9 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays; through Aug. 22.
- **Tickets:** \$13.50 to \$50. Call (800) 233-3123.

and the composer who would often say, "Music is my mistress."

"Certainly those two guys were kind of walking down the same road together."

It's no longer such a new idea. During the early '90s, while serving as the associate artistic director at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre, Epps was working on a larger-scale project. At the time, Epps said he considered using Ellington's music simply to underscore a production of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night"—Epps' favorite Shakespeare play. But after seeing a similar idea executed with a production of "Timon of Athens" in New York, and knowing that others had jazzed up the Bard, Epps decided to try something a little different.

"Basically, I did what Shakespeare has

Duke

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frequently done: steal the plot line and do a loose adaptation of the story," Epps said. "I really wanted to see if I could validly tell the story that I came up with using Ellington's songs."

"Some of the songs go very naturally into place, but there were a lot of holes."

That's when he called upon Mercedes Ellington, a collaborator with Epps on three previous

projects. He wanted access to Duke Ellington's music and, if Mercedes was interested, for her to join the project.

She was indeed. The oldest daughter of Duke Ellington's son Mercer, Mercedes Ellington had been a performer as well as the leader of her own tap company. She had choreographed her grandfather's music several times, including serving as the assistant choreographer for the Ellington revue "Sophisticated Ladies."

But for a woman who would become a well-known performer based on her own talents and abilities, bearing the Ellington

name and being partially responsible for continuing his legacy hasn't always been a welcome prospect.

"When I was growing up, I wanted to be a ballerina," said Mercedes. "My favorite music was classical, it was rock 'n' roll, it was anything but jazz. These Duke Ellington records would come to the house, and I would play them. And I would put them aside. It wasn't really any big deal."

"It was after I got into high school and when I was at Juilliard that I saw other people's reactions to the name and heard what they had to say about him that I realized who he was."

Mercedes was still a young woman when her grandfather died in 1974, but she had seen him perform and had gone with him and her father, Mercer (who would take over the Duke Ellington Orchestra), on a concert tour of the Soviet



Josh Estey/Staff Photographer

Kevin Ramsey, left, and Clinton Derricks-Carroll are in the musical, which is a co-production with the Arizona Theatre Company.

Union. Many years later, having gained a respect for the Ellington legacy, and with the 100th anniversary of Ellington's birth approaching, Mercedes Ellington was more than willing to join "Play On!"

"I always love to work with Sheldon. I learn so much from him," she said. "When he came up with this particular idea, it kind of made things come into focus for me."

"Play On!" opened in the fall of 1996 in San Diego — breaking box-office records. The following year, it opened in New York, where it played for four months and snagged three Tony Award nominations. Productions in Chicago and Seattle followed before "Play On!" would finally roll into Pasadena to coincide with the 1999 centenary celebration. The musical's L.A.-area premiere will take place at the theater where Epps now serves as artistic director.

"This would not have been possible if we hadn't been able to arrange it as a co-production with the Arizona Theatre Company," says Epps, "getting together the resources — meaning the money — to produce something that is on a much bigger scale than what the Playhouse usually does."

"Play On!" is the first time Duke's music has been assembled in book form to tell an already-created story, but it's hardly the composer's first theatrical piece. Ellington wrote several revues, including "Jump for Joy," "Queenie Pie" and "Beggars' Holiday."

But it is Ellington's Sacred Concerts that Mercedes Ellington and Epps point to as evidence that the legendary jazzman had theatrical blood running through his veins. Performed by a jazz orchestra in a house of worship, the sacred concerts were a blend of jazz, tap, modern dance and liturgical text with the Bible serving as inspiration.

"They were almost forerunners to what we would now call performance art," said Epps, who saw the Duke Ellington Orchestra perform one of the Sacred Concerts in the early 1970s. "He was a real visionary in theatrical terms as well as in musical terms."

"He believed anything he had to say politically or religiously, he would say through his music," said Mercedes Ellington. "And he just branched off into everything. I understand that he and Jackie Gleason were supposed to write an opera together. You know, it just never ended."