



Everything New Orleans

An unsettled, songful spirit: Alison Fraser inhabits 'Only a Paper Moon' at the 2013 Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival

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Sweet music wafts through many a Tennessee Williams work, though the sweetness tends to be off in the distance, almost taunting in its elusiveness. "In every play by Tennessee Williams, music is the paradise heard in the street," says director David Kaplan. But for many of his characters, all that informs their interior lives is despair and the faintest of hopes.

It is such a dichotomy – longed-for love versus the bitter here and now – that informs "Only a Paper Moon – A Tennessee Williams Songbook." Kaplan compiled and directed this remarkable piece, in which Broadway chanteuse Alison Fraser performs songs heard in various Williams dramas accompanied (and occasionally upstaged) by a seven-member swing band. What results over barely more than an hour is deft, insightful and altogether luscious.

The production was created for and had its premiere this past September at the Provincetown (Mass.) Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, which Kaplan co-founded and has guided since 2006. Recently he brought the show to New York, and now it is being presented at the 2013 Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival.

Performed Wednesday night in the intimate theater at the Old U.S. Mint, "Only a Paper Moon" is considerably more than a lone vocalist standing and delivering before a captive audience. Kaplan has her continually on the prowl -- one moment leaning down and resting her head on the shoulder of pianist Allison Leyton-Brown -- the production's superb musical director and arranger – and in another, departing the stage to engage the audience at extreme close-up. Under a lesser gaze much of this could smack of arbitrary business, but Kaplan is adroit at maintaining fundamental narrative logic.

Of course there is an inescapable contradiction: Williams intended his music to lurk in the background, while Kaplan puts in resolutely up front. You have to give yourself over to his method, never more so than when Fraser morphs into a strutting baritone offering up a lusty account of "For I am a Pirate King" from "The Pirates of Penzance" (heard amid "The Glass Menagerie"). Fraser proves an apt Savoyard, and the very incongruousness of the performance gives it additional, satisfyingly angular resonance.

With a voice that can rise from a dusky lower register to a sparkling, spicy top, Fraser is an exemplary medium for inhabiting a character full of boozy faux-toughness, who looks loneliness square in the face and does all she can to

avoid unravelling. Small-scale songs such as "You're the Only Star (in My Blue Heaven)" and the title number reveal a defining frailty, amplified by Fraser's ongoing monologue that is by turns languid, hilarious and at certain junctures, a little scary.

The accomplished band matches her emotional troughs and peaks, peaking in sustained sizzle with its reading of "St. Louis Blues," a rollicking indulgence never wants to cease fire. In so compact a theater the effect is intensely focused, with the players coming down to surround her in front of the stage.

Clutching a ukulele that she occasionally strums (trombonist J. Walter Hawkes also doubles on that instrument), clattering about on silly shoes in a dress possessed of superlative come-hither flimsiness, Fraser cuts a figure who shimmers in and out of her self-defined reality field.

My one quibble with Kaplan's strategy comes near the very end of "Only a Paper Moon." Fraser sings Noël Coward's "The Party's Over Now" as she drifts toward the back of the stage, and musing over her body melting into the universe, disappears. It is a fine instant of shattering quietude, but Kaplan compromises the sensation by having Fraser return immediately and launch into what becomes the show's *de facto* encore: "Bye Bye Blues." Far better to close softly with the preceding number, bring the cast on for bows, and then make "Bye Bye Blues" into a true encore.

Oh well. I won't belabor the point. Not when "Only a Paper Moon" manages to get at something lovely and mysterious, haunting one's spirit just as Williams' characters clutch at the solace that, like his distant melodies, so often eludes them.

Remaining performances of "Only a Paper Moon" are March 22 at 8 p.m. and March 24 at 7 p.m., both at the Hotel Monteleone, 214 Royal Street. Tickets are \$38. Call 504-581-1144.

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