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## ACCENT

### 'Love, Janis'

Play based on letters 'Pearl' wrote to her family opens Thursday

By Gerald M. Gay

Arizona Daily Star

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Randal Myler didn't have to guess what Janis Joplin was thinking when he sat down to create a play about her life.

The New York director/ playwright based his work on a collection of letters Joplin penned during her short career as one of the Woodstock era's most influential rock musicians.

Correspondence follows the wildchild singer's musings and emotions through her early days in San Francisco to shortly before her death from a drug overdose in Los Angeles in 1970. She was just 27 years old.

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"I had a million reasons why I thought I wasn't right for this play," Myler said last week by phone from New York City. "But when I learned Janis' mom saved all the letters Janis wrote, it became clear that I didn't have to write anything. I would edit and do interviews, but it was Janis' words. It wasn't some random guy writing some fake play about her. That intrigued me."

Joplin's letters give "Love, Janis" — which debuts Thursday in Tucson as part of the Arizona Theatre Company's RepFest — a certain level of authenticity not often found in films and theatrical productions revolving around musicians.

And Myler's comforting tone was just right for Janis' siblings, Michael and Laura Joplin, who had been actively looking for a director to work on a production about the singer.

Michael, a Tucson resident since 1981, is a full-time manager of his sister's estate.

"People had approached us numerous times to make a movie about Janis, but we never liked any of the scripts," he said. "We thought in the theater we would have the opportunity to be at a more intimate level with the audience to tell the story required.

"Randal had done a piece on Hank Williams ('Lost Highway'), and we really enjoyed his voice, so we asked him to take the lead. He got the feeling of it perfectly."

Adding to the authenticity is guitarist Sam Andrew, co-founder of Big Brother and the Holding Company and the play's musical director.

Big Brother was Joplin's first band in San Francisco and performed with the vocalist for three years before she left to form the Kozmic Blues Band. Andrew joined her in Kozmic and helped pen some of the group's material. He says he performed with Joplin more than anyone else and remembers hanging out with her a week before she died.

"She was a better singer than most people today realize," Andrew said. "She worked really hard at her singing. We were all slipshod and ramshackle, but she had the craft down."

Andrew says it is fitting that a production about Joplin's life includes her writings. He remembers his friend and musical companion as an avid letter writer on the road. "There was that whole side to her where she was just so intelligent and really well read," the 65-year-old musician said.

Then there were the things in the play that surprised even him.

"She was much more focused on material success than I suspected," he said. "At the time, it was kind of uncool to be career-driven. That was for people in L.A. and New York, and we were way superior to them. But she was focused on it from day one. It was important for her to be successful, while we wanted to be a part of the group and not push ourselves forward."

That insight into Joplin was old news to Michael, 53, who recalled his family gathering with excitement whenever another letter came in the mail.

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Cathy Richardson plays Janis Joplin in Arizona Theatre Company's production of "Love, Janis."

courtesy of DavidAllenStudio.com

#### Preview

"Love, Janis"

- Presented by: Arizona Theatre Company, the third in the company's three-play repertory.
- Conceived, adapted and directed by: Randal Myler.
- When: Preview is 7:30 p.m. Thursday and next Friday. Opening is 8 p.m. March 24, and performances continue in repertory through April 9.
- Where: Temple of Music and Art, 330 S. Scott Ave.
- Tickets: \$31-\$51 through the Temple box office, 622-2823.
- Cast: Cathy Richardson, Sophia Ramos, Michael Santo, Joel Hoekstra, Blake Thompson, Eric Massimino, Lisa Otey, Jim Wall, Rick Peron, Jonathan Sanford.
- Running time: 2 hours 15 minutes, with one intermission.
- Look for: The review in the March 27 Accent.
- Online: A rehearsal of the play, and video interview with Sam Andrew will be online Saturday at [www.azstarnet.com/accent](http://www.azstarnet.com/accent).

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"Janis was well educated, and that whole collection of letters really laid that out," he said. "She was a very interested observer of what was happening and changing at the time, and San Francisco was at the crux of these changes. She was almost reporting to us back in Port Arthur, Texas, with what was going on in the world."

The closest Myler ever got to Joplin growing up was as a teen watching her perform at locales around his San Francisco Bay Area home.

Had he had the opportunity to meet her during her lifetime, chances are he would have helped create "Love, Janis" much sooner than he did.

"Imagine what a letter from Janis might be like and it is probably a postcard with a lot of expletives," Myler said. "But these are intelligent, caring letters to her family. My show is just a fan letter that has been lost in the mail for 35 years."

• Contact reporter Gerald M. Gay at 573-4137 or ggay@azstarnet.com.



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