

ARTS

York's Susan McKenzie: Flying high in *Aviatrix*

By LAUREN GILLEN

York University is well known for its Faculty of Fine Arts, but too often the brash antics of the Theatre Department are an overshadowing force. It should not be forgotten that the Fine Arts Faculty is composed of several areas of study, not the least of which is dance. In fact, the department has been in existence since 1970, and its graduates have gone on to become professional dancers and choreographers.

One such person is Susan McKenzie. At 15 years old, this native-born British Columbian came to York to study dance only a few years after the department's inception. While her childhood training has been in classical ballet, later influences like Anna Wyman led her to the world of Modern Dance.

While McKenzie admits that the variety of institutions was limited in those days, she doesn't regret coming to York.

"It was a good place to be. I was very lucky that I went to a place where I emerged from shelter and met ideas, lots of ideas, and I also got a lot of training," says McKenzie.

She received her BFA in 1977. McKenzie credits much of her initial work to good timing. Therefore, she is concerned about upcoming graduates entering the world of professional dance.

"I came into the professional world at a very interesting time in the dance world's history in Canada," says McKenzie. There was an explosion of dance going on. The previous graduating class created a company called Dancemakers, and the next graduating class created a company for itself, called TIDE.

"So all the time, there were tremendous things going on and there was lots to do. You worked for no money or you worked for money. The present period in the arts doesn't reflect the same stimulus that I and my cohorts had. It's so desperately necessary to get a job."

McKenzie stressed that young dancers trying to break into the professional world should not just take any opportunity to dance, but should make opportunity.

"You take this dance class and that, until you find one that is pertinent to you. You watch dances until you find a choreographer that you admire — you hang around," explains McKenzie.

"Meanwhile, you develop yourself by working with choreographers who are available, and you go out of your way to find them. Hopefully, you're making your own dances. That's how you learn."

McKenzie enjoyed her six years working with Dancemakers, saying that she loves collaboration, but as she "tends to be interested in the idea of project work," she decided to go solo.

"This means that rather than being in a functionally married company situation, you work according to your needs. But, working alone is not really working alone. It is a more specific way of working with people."

In fact, her solo repertoire includes works by Canadian choreographers Murray Darroch and Jennifer Mascall, as well as her own. McKenzie feels that freelancing has also enabled her to become more creative and allowed her to incorporate movement and dance into the realm

of theatre, working with groups like the Necessary Angel Theatre Company, Theatre Direct, and Theatre Columbus.

Her most recent work with Necessary Angel, opening in Toronto in the spring. It is an adaptation of a Michael Ondaatje novel and will be entitled "Coming Through Slaughter."

Despite McKenzie's interest in theatre, she is still involved in solo work. In 1987, she received a grant from the Canada Council and her new work, "Aviatrix," made its Toronto premiere last week in the Danceworks presentation, "Solo Flights."

"Aviatrix," the opening work, was a 15 minute solo piece dedicated to Beryl Markham who, in 1936, was the first person to fly across the Atlantic Ocean.

In the piece, McKenzie captured the solitude and physical risk of flight. By using sounds of crowds, reporters, plane propellers, and narrative excerpts from Markham's memoirs, she created fluctuating rhythms. Wearing a cardio-telemetric monitor that amplifies her heartbeat, McKenzie responded to the undercurrent of sound through her own bodily rhythms.

With this barrage of sound, McKenzie risked losing her message, but the strong focus on visual images created an impression of flight, risk, and solitude.

Currently, Susan McKenzie is working on a new piece and has been commissioned to work with both Theatre Direct and Theatre Columbus. Look for her at the Winchester Street Theatre early in the new year, presenting a repertoire of her solo works.



TAKING FLIGHT: York grad Susan McKenzie in *Aviatrix*.

Bro Stu sums up Sister Rosetta

By BRO. STU

Sister Rosetta Tharpe
Sincerely, Sister Rosetta Tharpe
Vol. 8, Foremothers Series
Rosetta Records

When one thinks of gospel soloists, the names that come immediately to mind are likely Mahalia Jackson and Aretha Franklin, and maybe Marion Williams and Inez Andrews.

But one of the most startling and innovative voices belonged to Sister Rosetta Tharpe. From her church beginnings in the early '20s until her death in 1973, Tharpe walked the precarious line between gospel and jazz and blues, playing havoc with a volatile religious audience. A church favourite in the '30s, she was lured, by the end of that decade, to places like Harlem's Cotton Club where she sang jazz and jazzified gospel with

the likes of Cab Calloway and Lucky Millinder. She gave up jazz and blues in 1944, but a brief blues flirtation around 1953 finally alienated her once-devoted religious following. In the end, Tharpe did embrace the gospel world, playing out her last 20 years to American and European blues and folk audiences, and to small-town congregations in the southern United States. Hers was a rich and varied career, and she could belt out "I Want A Tall Skinny Papa" with as much passion as she could any gospel standard like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

Sincerely, Sister Rosetta Tharpe is an almost flawless package, a stunning showcase of Tharpe's incredible vocal range. The collection spans the years 1941 — when Tharpe recorded with Lucky Millinder's big band — to 1969, four years before her death at age 57. The record is a representa-

tive sampling of Tharpe's strangely neglected work in jazz, blues, and gospel. Beautifully packaged, with extensive and fascinating (if not scholarly) jacket notes by label owner Rosetta Reitz, *Sincerely* also offers up seven fine photos of Tharpe, most with trademark guitar and jubilant expression.

I have only two complaints. Firstly, the tracks are inexplicably scrambled chronologically, when ordered dates would have provided an extraordinary look at the changes Tharpe's voice underwent, paralleling in many ways that of Billie Holiday. Also, the jacket notes contain at least one glaring error: two of the Millinder cuts are dated 1946, two years after Tharpe had left secular music (a Jazz Heritage album dates them at 1941).

Tharpe's jazz and blues cuts are represented by a great "Trouble in

ERRATUM:

In last week's article, "Diamond unleashes Ubu on York campus," we erroneously named Elizabeth Wilson as one of the cast members. It was Elizabeth McGlaughlin who played the dual role of Remy de Gaurmont and Berthe de Courriere. We apologize for the error, and any confusion it may have caused.

Mind," her own "Rock Daniel," Millinder's rousing "Shout, Sister, Shout," and a beautifully phrased, gospel-inflected "What Have I Done?" (1953). These should convince listeners that Tharpe could have held her own with the best of the woman jazz vocalists. The record also includes three tracks from a heavily jazz-influenced 1956 gospel session with a five-piece band (Edgar Hayes on piano), with the mournful "Two Little Fishes" being the real standout from this date. Also, her jazz version of "Down By The Riverside" from a 1943 session with Millinder makes an intriguing comparison to the gospel version she would

cut just five years later with the Sammy Price Trio (see the classic *Gospel Train* album).

Tharpe showed great range in the diversity of genres she worked in, but even within gospel she covered amazing ground during her nearly 50-year career. Probably most familiar here would be her work with Price's trio, and her duets with Marie Knight, again backed by the trio. *Sincerely* contains her classic duet with Knight on "Up Above My Head," and a complex uptempo vocal arrangement in which Tharpe and her mother, gospel belter Katie

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