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## Regional

Posted: Tue., Jul. 18, 2006, 3:44pm PT

## Love, Janis

(Marines Memorial Theater, San Francisco; 650 seats; \$67 top)

A Columbia Artists Theatricals and Madstone Prods. presentation, in association with TUS and Bartner/Jenkins Entertainment, of a play in two acts inspired by the book 'Love, Janis' by Laura Joplin, conceived, adapted and directed by Randal Myler. Musical direction, Sam Andrew. Original production design, Jules Fisher, Peggy Eisenhauer.

**With:** Katrina Chester, Morgan Hallett, Cathy Richardson, Michael Santo, Joel Hoekstra, Jeffrey Chin, Thomas Dickow, Niel Levonius, Eric Massimino, Chris Pimentel, David Rokeach.

By [DENNIS HARVEY](#)

Trying to re-create the excitement of a beloved entertainer without falling into outright impersonation is a tricky business. But the new edition of Randal Myler's "Love, Janis" playing its subject's adopted hometown pulls it off in a production that's more evocative homage than "Beatlemania"-style reproduction. Opening-nighter Cathy Richardson (who alternates with Katrina Chester in the vocally exhausting role) delivers impressive musical pyrotechnics in the Joplin style, while Morgan Hallett captures an unforgettable personality as the "talking Janis" drawn from letters and interviews. This strong concert-cum-biographical-monologue hybrid is a natural for San Francisco, with touring potential.

Richardson and Chester (both rock recording artists in their own right), as well as Hallett and several backstage collaborators, are veterans of prior "Love, Janis" productions, including its 2001 Off Broadway incarnation. Musical director Sam Andrew was a founding member of Big Brother & the Holding Company, Joplin's first rock unit. Light-show image designer Bill Ham created the psychedelic projections for that band's first public performance as well as many other '60s San Francisco acts.

All this experience has lent the current show a confidence in its own skin that sidesteps the waxworks morbidity of many reanimated-legend theatrical efforts.

Not that the structure is especially inspired: Musical sequences with an onstage band alternate with interludes in which Hallett (often trading lines with her identically

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In 'Love, Janis,' Morgan Hallett, left, plays the talking Joplin; Cathy Richardson sings as the '60s dynamo.

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dressed "singing Janis" counterpart, but dominating these scenes nonetheless) recites from Joplin's plaintive, articulate, revealing letters to her family back in Texas or responds to questions from an unseen interviewer (voiced by Michael Santo).

The song/talk/song/talk pattern grows somewhat monotonous, making "Love, Janis" seem longer than it is (though it may actually be longer than it needs to be). Still, complaining that it's a tad too much of a good thing shouldn't suggest the show is boring or repetitive. Alternately delighted and self-critical in her letters home (which were collected in sister Laura's book of the same name), Joplin is a colorful narrator of her own rapid, vertiginous rise in the late '60s rock explosion.

The show starts with her nervously explaining she's hitchhiked from Texas to San Francisco in 1966, at the behest of friend Chet Helms, to audition as a singer with Big Brother. Even well into her stardom, she continues to reassure the folks back home that she does "mean to go back to school" some day, and she's initially skeptical about following her muse ("I'm not at all sold on the idea of becoming a poor man's Cher").

But after being derided as a freak her whole life (at the U. of Texas, frat boys actually nominated her for "ugliest man on campus"), she blossomed in the counterculture environs of San Francisco, exclaiming at one point, "Thank you God -- I am not alone!"

Though dogged by occasional creative, financial and personal frustrations, not to mention a penchant for substance abuse, Joplin quickly became an iconic figure, rock's leading female talent. Critics often thought that talent underserved by her backup bands; she was on her third one when she died of a heroin overdose in 1970, not long after Jimi Hendrix did the same (also at age 27).

Onstage and off, Joplin seemed incapable of keeping her emotions under wraps, exuding warmth, pain, "outrageousness" ("It is not a place for outrageous people," she snapped about her close-minded Texas hometown), sexiness, self-doubt and humor.

While neither of the performers on opening night resemble her physically -- beyond aping the body language and tangled blond hair -- in different ways both channel her generous yet self-destructive spirit.

Hallett's a petite, toned Holly Hunter type, and her physically restless, braying-voiced narrator captures a lovable mass of contradictions as she waxes with equal enthusiasm about sex, drugs, reading "The Hobbit" or seeing Pearl Bailey in "Hello, Dolly!"

The tall, conventionally attractive Richardson does a fair job evoking the performer's endearingly graceless stage moves, but the main attraction is her vocal instrument, which (by adding considerable grit to her own singing style) duly reproduces some of the hair-raising intensity Joplin delivered on classics like "Down on Me," "Summertime," "Ball and Chain," "Mercedes Benz," "Try," "Me and Bobby McGee" and "Get It While You Can."

Simple stage setup has a couple of armchairs flanking sliding panels that frequently part to reveal the band's stage-upon-the-stage platform. Their perfs are accompanied by Ham's globular and kaleidoscopic psych-art designs; elsewhere, slide projections are used at times to chart Joplin's travels.

The band itself, which expands from a four- to a seven-piece to convey her different groups' sounds, is excellent, the sound mix suitably loud but clear.

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Set, lighting, production design, Norman Schwab; costumes, Lorraine Venberg; original light show images, Bill Ham; sound, Eric Stahlhammer. Opened, reviewed July 16, 2006. Running time: 2 HOURS, 20 MIN.

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