



BLACK ENSEMBLE THEATER

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For Immediate Release

BLACK ENSEMBLE THEATER COMPANY PRESENTS THE WORLD PREMIERE OF 'NINA SIMONE: THE HIGH PRIESTESS SPEAKS'

February 19, 2006—The Black Ensemble Theater Company continues to celebrate the “Season of Women” with the World Premiere of a new musical produced by Jackie Taylor, founder and executive director of the Black Ensemble Theater. *Nina Simone: The High Priestess Speaks*, written by Ebony Joy, and directed by Ms. Taylor and Ms. Joy, celebrates the life and music of this talented, and controversial, legend. All performances will be at the Black Ensemble Theater, 4520 N. Beacon in Chicago. The official Press Opening is Sunday, February 19 at 3:00 p.m. *Nina Simone: The High Priestess Speaks* is generously sponsored by The Sara Lee Foundation, The Chicago Tribune Foundation and LaSalle Bank.

The Black Ensemble Theater has created a name for itself by producing World Premiere musicals highlighting the lives of influential African Americans. At the start of the 2004-2005 season, Taylor announced that the year would be dedicated to African American women—some legends, some not—who have overcome tremendous odds and adversities in their lives. The season began in 2004 with the smash hit, *Somebody Say Amen (Great Women of Gospel)*, which played for more than seven months and continued with *At Last: A Tribute to Etta James*, which also extended well beyond its original closing date and played for more than nine months. The original “Season of Women” is now in its second year. *Nina Simone: The High Priestess Speaks* is the third original work in this series celebrating the achievements of African American women.

“There never was and never will be another artist like Dr. Nina Simone,” notes Taylor. “She answered to no one but herself and took the political, social and musical worlds by storm. Her struggles and achievements perfectly mirror the turbulent times in which she lived.”

The musical abilities and natural talent of Nina Simone (born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in 1933) were noticed at an early age, prompting a local benefactor to underwrite her studies in piano. The child prodigy attended the Julliard School and attempted to continue her studies in Philadelphia but, because of racism, was denied admittance to the Conservatory there. Although her training (and her heartfelt, lifelong desire) were directed at a career as a classical pianist, when money ran short Eunice took a job playing piano and singing in a local bar. Afraid that her Methodist minister mother would disapprove of such a job, she changed her name to Nina Simone. From that first gig came a recording contract and an album that featured “I Loves You, Porgy.” The song sold more than one million copies, hit #1 on the charts, and launched the career of a legend.

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Simone's music was a sound distinctly her own: a mix of jazz, soul, folk, gospel, pop, blues and classical that defied a single classification. She wrote and arranged all her own pieces, and two of her songs, "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" and "Mississippi Goddam," capture in music the voice of a generation striking out against civil injustices. Simone always acted on her beliefs; in 1978 she was arrested (and released immediately) for withholding income taxes in 1971-73 in protest of the Viet Nam War. She struggled against the giant music corporations, always contending that she had been denied royalty and other payments due to her. In spite of all this, however, she was a consummate artist. She incorporated her character and personality into each performance, seamlessly integrating her fiery spirit into her music. Nina Simone died at her Chateau in France in 2003.

Nina Simone: The High Priestess Speaks stars Yahdina U-Deen as Nina Simone; the cast also includes Will Davis, Rueben Echoles, Alan Edge, Marquécia Jordan, Morgan Malone and Dawn Michelle.

Musical Director for the production is Jimmy Tillman (drums), with arrangements by Thomas Washington. Other band members include Hank Ford (saxophone), Paul Howard (trumpet), Bill McFarland (trombone), Anderson Edwards (bass), Derrick Bounds (piano) and Herb Walker (guitar).

Rounding out the production team are Ron White (sound design), Carl Ulaszek (set design), Denise Karczewski (lighting design) and Evelyn Danner (costume design).

PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE & TICKET INFORMATION

Tickets for *Nina Simone: The High Priestess Speaks* are currently on sale. Tickets are priced at \$35 for all performances. The performance schedule is Friday and Saturday evenings at 8:00 p.m., and Sunday afternoons at 3:00 p.m. Discounts are available for seniors, students and groups. All performances will take place at The Black Ensemble Theater, 4520 N. Beacon. Tickets are available by calling the Black Ensemble Theater Box Office at 773-769-4451 or Ticketmaster at 312-902-1500, or online at ticketmaster.com.

The Black Ensemble Theater

The Black Ensemble Theater was founded in 1976 by Jackie Taylor, who has written and directed more than 100 productions for the company. In addition to its mainstage productions, the Black Ensemble Theater produces 'Plays with a Purpose,' a series of original youth-oriented musicals, designed to teach students positive life lessons and values, as well as several community-based programs that use theater arts to enrich the lives of countless students and families. The mission of the Black Ensemble Theater Company is threefold: to utilize theater to help eradicate racism; to perpetuate the history of the African American people; and to use theater to serve disenfranchised communities.

For more information on the Black Ensemble Theater Company, please visit www.BlackEnsembleTheater.org or call 773-769-4451.

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