

New Orleans Gambit

Sister Act

By Dalt Wonk
March 18, 2003

Kathy Randels as Nita and Katie Pearl as Zita have done an impressive job of polishing up their homage to nearly forgotten local dance act, Nita and Zita, recently re-stated at Southern Rep.

Flora and Piroska Gellert were born in 1922 in the Jewish shtetl of Nagybanya, Hungary. As children, they came to America, at first joining a brother in Brooklyn. At some point, they transformed themselves into "artistic dancers." They performed all over the United States and "internationally" -- which probably means Paris, Egypt, Shanghai and Panama. In the late 1940s, they settled in a Creole cottage on Dauphine Street. They continued performing in Bourbon Street burlesque venues until they were well up in their 50s. Then, they retired and gradually withdrew into a world of their own.

Faubourg Marigny, when they first moved in, was largely an Italian/Irish family neighborhood, and these exotic gypsies were looked on with some suspicion. Not that they made great efforts to win the hearts and minds of the natives; they apparently liked to sunbathe naked. And then, there was the time they tried to start an exercise salon for women of a certain age. After all, they had kept themselves in the best of shape. Who answered their ads? Horny johns looking for a good time. One can almost see the eyes of disapproving neighbors peeking through the shutters and running to the telephone to wholesale the latest scandal (conveniently forgetting that the johns were stopped at the door -- with a blast of mitteleuropean contempt).

As the years went on, the sisters turned their energy to maintaining and embellishing their house. They repaired the roof themselves. They repaired the floors. They painted every square inch of the walls, of the fixtures and of the furniture with elaborate, colorful designs. They retreated into some shared dream. We can catch a glimpse of this dream in a photo album that miraculously turned up after their deaths in a thrift shop on Frenchmen Street. Though way up in years, they have posed for the camera wearing the flamboyant costumes of their youth.

Writer/director Lisa D'amour, working collaboratively with Kathy Randels, Anne-Liese Fox and Katie Pearl (the three of whom did exhaustive research on the sisters) created Nita and Zita in workshop performances over the last two years. The show was back on the boards recently at Southern Rep, between engagements in Austin and New York. I saw the first outing at Zeitgeist in December 2000, and the progress from that flimsy piece to its present incarnation is striking.

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Nita and Zita

Page 1 of 2

To begin with, Shawn Hall's cloth set is stunning, steeped in the nostalgic glamour of a turn-of-the-century fairground tent show. Olivia Wildz's costumes have the delightful piquancy of old French girlie postcards. And Tom McDermott, who accompanies the show on upright piano, has created an excellent score, mixing original tunes with vintage numbers.

Into these tasteful surroundings come Nita (Randels) and Zita (Pearl), wearing satin robes, which they doff to reveal modestly provocative polka-dotted leotards, with cutouts in the belly and the backs of the knees. They do the first of a series of those sort of hard-to-categorize dances, the performers of which are called "artistes." A circus acrobat who dreamed of joining Isadora Duncan's troupe but found herself instead auditioning for a coochie act might have choreographed these moves, with their naive grace.

Then, the girls sit on stools, cushioned with a discrete pink fringe, and answer the questions of a somewhat befuddled though well-meaning interviewer (Tony Paone). There are a some nice little staging touches: shadows on a translucent gauze curtain, projected slides, video footage, and assorted props to suggest daily life inside the house. But the show is carried by the sisters, who are blessed with equally irresistible, but totally opposite types of charm.

Nita, the elder, faces the world with a disillusioned, seen-it-all toughness. She is tall, slim and, to use the lingo of her heyday, a good-looking, hard-boiled dame. With a "you're welcome, darlink" accent, yet! Kathy Randels pulls this off without a hint of caricature and, amazingly, not a whiff of camp, God bless her. Pearl as Zita, the young sister, is shorter and plumper, and exudes a warmhearted, droll coquettishness. Together, they are a great fun.

For instance, when Zita delivers a monologue about the tragic situation they fled as children to the accompaniment of a rhapsodic accordion, Nita mutters, offhandedly, "The Reign of the White Terror was actually much later. And who needs the schmaltzy music." The long, uneventful decline of their lives and the horror of Zita being left alone is captured by a yearly countdown whose repetitiveness at first wearies, but curiously -- almost perversely -- gains in effectiveness as it goes on.

Nita and Zita is a tasty and tasteful new local confection. Keep your eye out for its return.