

# NITA AND ZITA

*Performance looks at showgirls who made their lives into art*

*"The final event is not always the end of a story. Sometimes the end can be the thoughts the story makes you think. When I think of Nita and Zita, I think of youth, of adventure, of glamour. And I think of loneliness, of old age and death. And I also think about the nature of that elusive quality called mystique, and of how only a precious few ever acquire it."*

—J.E. Bourgoyne, in his 1996 Times-Picayune story "Sister Act."

By David Cuthbert  
Theater writer

**M**any people have wondered about Nita and Zita, the Romanian sisters born Flora and Piroska Gellert who emigrated to the United States in 1922 and eventually became eccentric fixtures in the Faubourg Marigny. This weekend, a new performance piece recreates their mystique.

After they arrived in America, the sisters became an international dance team whose artistry was called "almost ethereal" by a San Francisco critic in 1936. They came to New Orleans to dance on Bourbon Street in the early 1940s and retired as "artistes de cabaret" in the '50s. Flora, who was Nita, died in 1985 at the age of 90, Piroska in 1991 at 87.

By that time, they had become Marigny neighborhood eccentrics: the "gypsy ladies" who went to Schwegmann's with a little cart whose fabric handle, like their stage costumes, street clothes, hats and gloves, they had sewed themselves. They covered the outside and everything inside their Dauphine Street home — walls, furniture, even a sink — with dots and patterns of color.

Their legend grew after their deaths, when their belongings — in particular their meticulously designed and constructed costumes and clothes — started to appear in a neighbor's garage sale and at collectible shops both here and as far away as New York City. The Nita and Zita aficionado who calls herself Princess told Times-Picayune staff writer J.E. Bourgoyne that they "were fabulous women who turned everything they touched into art."

"Princess may be at our shows, selling her Nita and Zita postcards," Kathy Randels said. Randels, perhaps New Orleans best-



Katie Pearl (left) and Kathy Randels star in 'Nita and Zita' at The Core theater space in the State Palace Theater.

known performance artist, has, along with director Lisa D'Amour, "been obsessed with these women for more than two years now," developing a performance piece with music first unveiled a year and a half ago at Zeitgeist Multi-Disciplinary Arts Center. Tonight, they return with a new "Nita and Zita," at a new theater space, the Core, at the State Palace Theatre.

Randels plays Nita and New York performer Katie Pearl joins her as Zita. A live piano score will be performed by Tom McDermott, while Nita and Zita's celebrated costumes have been "re-imagined" by designer Olivia Wildz. Nita-Zita artifacts will be displayed and part of the visual element will be actual, if fragmentary, film footage of Nita

and Zita painting their steps and repairing their roof.

"Like everything else in their lives, it's a total tease," Randels said, "something to add to what's known and unknown about them.

"This much-changed version uses more of an interview framework. Nita and Zita come back to share with us stories, dances and images of their lives."

"So much of what we've done," D'Amour said, "is based on what they left behind. So much care, style and love went into what they created — just looking at it, studying it, tells you something about them. We're not trying to fill in the gaps, though. Sometimes the gaps are the most intriguing part. The gaps are part of their mystique."

In addition to the brief moments of film, Randels and company have sought out people who knew them, lived close enough to them to know that they sun-bathed nude, or could describe their shuffling walk or tell which was the more dominant sister.

"I'm fascinated by the juxtaposition of an extremely external life lived on the stage to the extremely hermetic, internal life they lived in their later years," Randels said. "They were considered odd because, as New Orleanians say, 'They ain't from here,' so they were exotic, eccentric objects of curiosity;

## NITA AND ZITA

**What:** ArtSpot Productions and The Dog & Pony Theatre present an original performance piece directed by Lisa D'Amour.

**Where:** The Core performance space, State Palace Theatre, 1108 Canal St.

**When:** Opens tonight and Sat at 8 and Sun at 7; continues through June 16 with performances Thurs-Sat at 8 and Sun at 7. Special June 10 show at 8 is pay-what-you-can.

**Tickets:** \$12, \$10 for students and seniors. Call 866-7387.

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# La g n i a p p e

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which turned them even more inward.

"All we have is a glimpse into their lives, their history. Part of what makes them legendary is that we know so little about them. They were immigrants who became performers who withdrew from life to become folk artists in their own little corner of the world."

Told that their work sounded like theatrical archaeology — divining the past from unearthed artifacts, D'Amour said, "It's totally that; it feels like that. We're sifting through these items and stories, digging beyond one layer to get to another. We explore the sister dynamic and even our own search to find out more about them. We took items of theirs to a psychic and that became part of the show, too."

"I feel like I'm still in the process of getting to know them," said Pearl, the newcomer to the project, "but every new clue makes them more and more real to me. Plus, I'm part Romanian and I look very much like them in their pictures."

"Some of the things they made are unbelievable. When you see the way they stitched, you can tell they were intensely creative in their own, wondrous way. And after they stopped performing, this true, weird creativity they had was not speaking to anyone but themselves!

"They painted their whole

**"So much of what we've done is based on what they left behind. So much care, style and love went into what they created — just looking at it, studying it, tells you something about them."**

*Director Lisa D'Amour*

house, every surface of the house! There was virtually no separation between themselves and what they created.

"We really don't know, of course, if what we're doing is right or wrong as far as their lives and art are concerned," Pearl said, "but our work impulse is very pure. We're working from the heart, from what we feel

emotionally and sensually about them."

"And then there's the excitement of doing the first theater in a new space," Randels said.

The entrance to The Core is just to the left of the State Palace box office, up a flight of stairs and to the left. It has a stage, with walls painted with gothic day-glo murals. It's been used for small rock band performances, but "Nita and Zita" will be its first theater tenant. A similar space exists on the other side of the stairwell, and both spaces were part of a barber-beauty school when office buildings encircled what was originally the Loew's State Theatre.

"There's a bar there," D'Amour said, "and there will be candles on the tables. It feels intimate, like a real cabaret space, perhaps very much like somewhere Nita and Zita might actually have worked."