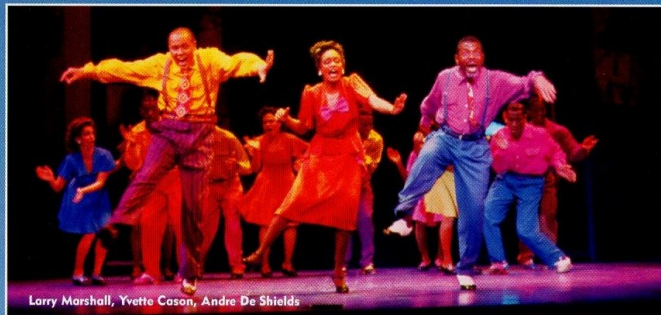


PLAY ON!



Larry Marshall, Yvette Cason, Andre De Shields

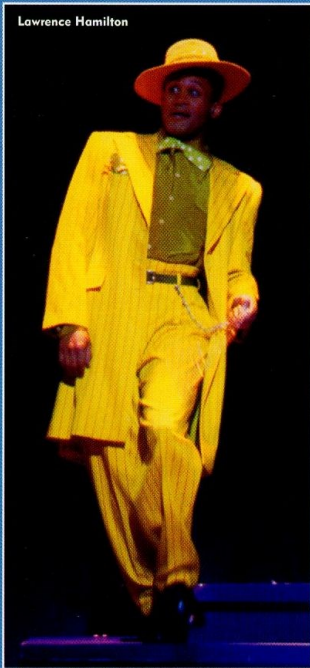
"MR. SHAKESPEARE, MEET MR. ELLINGTON."

It would have given me incredible joy to actually make this introduction in person and to watch the creative sparks that surely would have flown had these two geniuses actually sat down in a room together. Lacking the ability to truly make magic (or to time travel), I decided to explore the theatrical magic that might be created by combining the joy, the romance and the music of Shakespeare's play **Twelfth Night** with the brilliance, the sensuality, the humor and the drama of Ellington's songs. Out of this creative matchmaking, the musical **Play On!** was born. I drew on my knowledge of my favorite Shakespeare play from two appearances as Feste while I was still

an actor, and from seeing numerous productions of the play. It always seemed to me that **Twelfth Night** was the most musical of all of Shakespeare's plays. In fact, the plot of the play had been musicalized several times in the past. But I thought that there was a fresh approach in moving the story and the major characters from the magical kingdom of Illyria to the swinging kingdom of Harlem in the 1940s. And who better to provide the score than Duke Ellington himself. For Count Orsino, music was the food of love. For Duke, music was his mistress. Already this seemed a perfect match.

I felt that the most important plot issue to resolve for a contemporary audience was the

Lawrence Hamilton



question of the female lead getting into male garb. It was important to find a viable and believable reason for her to become him. This was answered by studying Duke's world ... the world of jazz. It was then (and some might say it remains) a man's world.

I hit upon the idea of a young girl, Vy, who comes to Harlem, not to sing, but to write songs and to work with the Duke, the greatest band leader in Harlem (does he sound familiar?). She quickly learns from her Uncle Jester, a hoofer at the Cotton Club, that in Harlem a woman will never be accepted or taken seriously as a writer. But like many a strong heroine in musical comedy, she refuses to accept defeat. The answer? If it takes looking like a man to enter this world then show me the way to the tailor shop, and call me "Vy-man!"

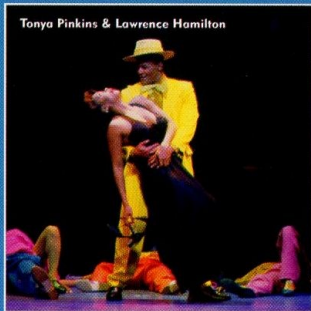
Outfitted in her new pinstripe suit she is taken to meet the Duke. He is found a prisoner in his penthouse apartment, sighing and crying over his lost love, Lady Liv, Harlem's queen of the blues (just as Shakespeare's Count Orsino sighed and cried over his heart's passion, Lady Olivia). Impressed with Vy-man's music, he sends this young talent to the Cotton Club to woo his lady, using one of Vy's songs as if newly composed by the Duke especially for Lady Liv that afternoon. At the club she meets the great diva, who is immediately smitten with this charming though slightly different young man, and the whole chain of events

that has everybody falling for the wrong person is set into motion.

Concurrently, the employees of the club, Jester, Sweets, and Miss Mary are out to teach the pompous and dictatorial club manager Rev a lesson. Rev gained his name and reputation because he is the most serious man in Harlem and he smiles even less frequently than **Twelfth Night's** Malvolio. Knowing that Rev is also infatuated with Lady Liv, the comic trio convinces him that the only way to win her heart is to learn to swing, give up his stiff ballads and learn the joys of scat. In time all of the illusions and disguises that are put on create only havoc and distress, and it is only by dropping the shams and cover-ups that all of the lovers can come together as they should and celebrate the foods of love.

After crafting this storyline and identifying the musical moments, I approached a longtime collaborator who had been my choreographic right and left legs for many years on a variety of theatrical projects. Her first name is Mercedes. Her last name just happens to be Ellington. She too immediately recognized the "jazz" in this idea. She asked if it would be helpful to have a printout of all of the Ellington songs. Helpful? It was manna from musical heaven. I expected quite a long list, but was truly surprised by the overwhelming stack of titles that she brought back to me. Pages and pages that listed the titles of over a thousand

Tonya Pinkins & Lawrence Hamilton



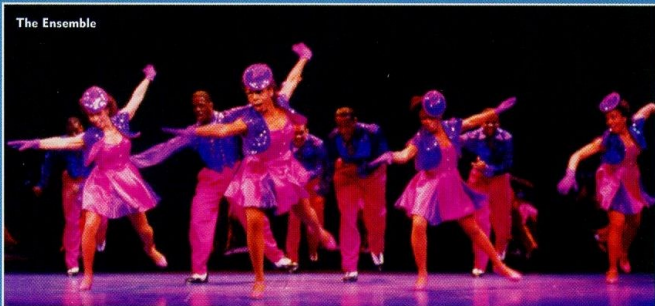
songs. Was ever there a director so blessed with a composing collaborator whose talents answered every demand? I think not. Armed with this list and with copies of every record, cassette tape, or CD of Ellington vocal collections I could put my hands on (and there were surprisingly quite a few), I set out with my composer to "write" the score. Mr. Ellington surprised me at every turn. The wide range of his music so often provides exactly the right tone for the dramatic moments and the development of the musical's characters with striking parallels to Shakespeare's text.

Orsino's love laments are perfectly captured in the Duke's musical introduction "I Let A Song Go Out Of My Heart." Viala's "Make me a wil-

Center: Cheryl Freeman, Carl Anderson and Ensemble



The Ensemble



low cabin" speech finds a musical partner in Vy's plea on the Duke's behalf, "Don't Get Around Much Anymore." Rev is wonderfully "gulled" into foolishness with "It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing," and the comic charade pays off in the second act as his newly zoot-suited character jives his way through "I'm Beginning To See The Light," wearing a yellow monstrosity as outrageous as Malvolio's yellow stockings and cross garters.

The lovers too find apt musical expressions for their passions. Vy and Duke both give vent to their unrequited love in "I Got It Bad and That Ain't Good." Lady Liv finds the ideal fiery outlet for her anger, disappointment and frustration in the torch song "I Ain't Got Nothin' But

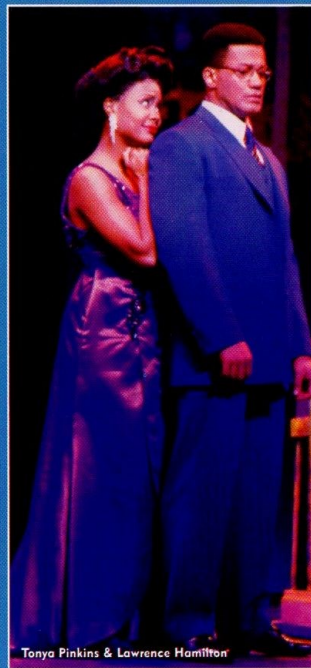
The Blues." All four of the major characters find a perfect expression of their loneliness and misery in "Solitude." Jester and Sweets (the Feste and Toby Belch of our story) express their quite different meditation on lost love in the comic and rowdy blues choruses of "Rocks In My Bed." And the musical's Maria, Miss Mary, celebrates the joys of love with Sweets in one of Duke's signature songs, "Love You Madly." There are the wonderful love ballads that bring the characters together, Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's gorgeous song "Something To Live For," and the perfect introduction to romance at last required, "Prelude To A Kiss." Could any quartet of lovers ever ask for more? For the show's finale, all of Harlem celebrates the marriage of the royal

couples in the joyous cadences that announce that everyone and everything is at last "In A Mellow Tone."

Not only do the Ellington songs meet the dramatic needs of the plot structure, but they also offer the opportunity for dazzling performances. The Broadway cast has snatched up this musical gold, polished it, added their own personalities, and they fire it back out in showstopper after showstopper. It was our intention to pay homage to the performance styles of the great Black performers of the early part of the 1930s and 40s. Such legendary performers as Ethel Waters, Cab Calloway, Fats Waller, Sarah Vaughn, Avon Long, the Nicholas Brothers, Pearl Bailey, John Bubbles, and another great "Lady," Billie Holiday. In so doing this cast creates their own "black magic," offering memorable performances that only add to that breathtaking lineage.

Play On! was always intended to be a celebration. A celebration of the great Duke Ellington. A celebration of the magic of black performers. A celebration of the joys of love and music. Audiences in the theatre readily join in on the party with each performance. I hope that as you listen to this recording you too will be tempted to join the celebration. Get up and dance, sing along, or share a cozy moment with your lover. After all, sweet music is the food of love, so let's Play On and On!

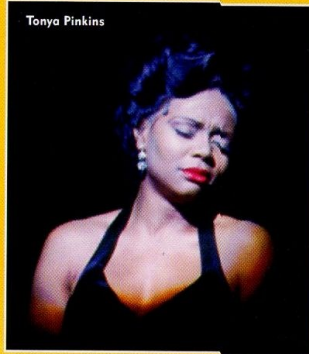
- SHELDON EPPS



Tonya Pinkins & Lawrence Hamilton

The Cast
(in order of appearance)

Vy.....**Cheryl Freeman**
 Jester.....**Andre De Shields**
 Sweets.....**Larry Marshall**
 Miss Mary.....**Yvette Cason**
 CC.....**Crystal Allen**
 Duke.....**Carl Anderson**
 Rev.....**Lawrence Hamilton**
 Lady Liv.....**Tonya Pinkins**



Denizens of Harlem.....**Ronald "Cadet" Bastine, Jacquelyn Bird, Wendee Lee Curtis, Byron Easley, Alan H. Green, Frantz G. Hall, Bryan S. Haynes, Gil P, Lacy Darryl Phillips, Stacie Precia, Angela Robinson, Lisa Scialappa, Erika Vaughn, Karen Callaway Williams**

Musicians:

Conductor - **J. Leonard Oxley**; Piano/Asst. Conductor - **George Caldwell**;
 Reeds - **Jerome Richardson, Jay Brandford, Jimmy Cozier**;
 Trumpets - **Earl Gardner, Virgil Jones, Stanton Davis**; Trombone - **Britt Woodman**;
 Bass - **Ben Brown**; Percussion - **Brian Grice**
 Musical Coordinator **Bill Meade**

Album Produced by **BRUCE KIMMEL**

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 Assistants **PAUL J. FALCONE, MICHAEL C. MCCOY (NY), MICHAEL PARNIN (LA)**
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Assistant to the Producer **GRETCHEN WEISS (NY), ESTHER MONK (LA)**
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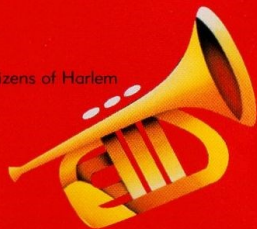
Despite what some would have you believe, making a cast album is a team effort. Therefore, the producer would like to give large thanks to **Bill Meade** for his invaluable help in all matters, the legendary **Luther Henderson, Leonard Oxley**, the phenomenal cast and band, the gracious & helpful **Sheldon Epps** (a true gentleman), **Victoria** and **Mitchell Maxwell, Cheryl L. West, Mercedes Ellington, Robert Mark Kalfin, Michael Caprio, Brian Giorgi, The Hit Factory, Vinnie** "no more headphones - ever!" **Cirilli**, and the magnificent magical music of **Duke Ellington**.

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MUSICAL NUMBERS

- 1 **TAKE THE "A" TRAIN** Vy, Ensemble
- 2 **DROP ME OFF IN HARLEM** Vy, Denizens of Harlem
- 3 **I'VE GOT TO BE A RUG CUTTER** Jester, Vy, Cotton Club Dancers
- 4 **I LET A SONG GO OUT OF MY HEART** Duke
- 5 **MOOD INDIGO** Lady Liv
- 6 **DON'T GET AROUND MUCH ANYMORE** Vy, Lady Liv
- 7 **DON'T YOU KNOW I CARE** Rev
- 8 **IT DON'T MEAN A THING** Jester, Miss Mary, Sweets, Rev
- 9 **I GOT IT BAD AND THAT AIN'T GOOD** Duke, Vy
- 10 **HIT ME WITH A HOT NOTE AND WATCH ME BOUNCE** Vy, Duke, Duke's Band
- 11 **I'M JUST A LUCKY SO AND SO** Jester, Cotton Club Dancers
- 12 **SOLITUDE** Vy, Duke, Lady Liv, Rev
- 13 **I AIN'T GOT NOTHIN' BUT THE BLUES** Lady Liv
- 14 **I'M BEGINNING TO SEE THE LIGHT** Rev, Cotton Club Dancers
- 15 **I DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT YOU** Vy
- 16 **ROCKS IN MY BED** Sweets, Jester
- 17 **LOVE YOU MADLY** Miss Mary, Sweets
- 18 **PRELUDE TO A KISS** Vy, Duke
- 19 **IN A MELLOW TONE** Vy, Duke, Lady Liv, Rev, Denizens of Harlem

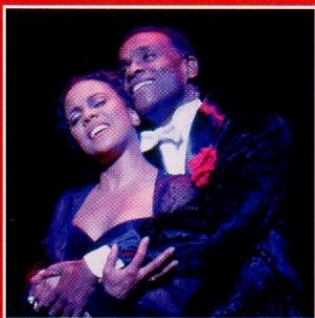
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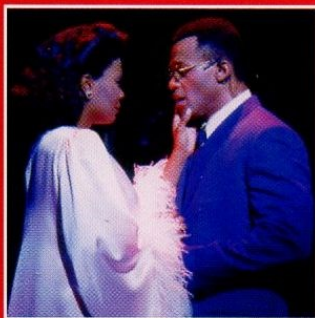
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PLAY ON!
ORIGINAL CAST RECORDING

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Cheryl Freeman & Carl Anderson



Tonya Pinkins & Lawrence Hamilton

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DUKE ELLINGTON

Arrangements, Musical Supervision and Orchestrations
LUTHER HENDERSON

with

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Choreographed by
MERCEDES ELLINGTON

Conceived and Directed by
SHELDON EPPS

Album Produced by
BRUCE KIMMEL

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