Billy Joel no stranger to 52nd Street

52nd Street — Billy Joel; Columbia FC 36609.

By Joel West

For those who have been waiting for this album, wait no longer. Or rather, wait until Monday — 8:30 pm in the Hayden Corridor at 2:30pm For further information call 495-1000.

Only a hermit could have avoided hearing the single, "My Life," which has received extensive airplay on all the local rock stations. While the hokey-tonk piano is nice, and the background vocals display the novelty which Mr. Joel is capable of, the song lacks direction. One further cave: for those whose stomach turns at a three beat (as mine does), avoid this song.

As usual, Joel's lyrics are inspired compared to those of his rivals in the field. Joel's crisp vocal style is impeccable, even on such losing efforts as "My Life." His main problem on this album seems to be coning with the awkwardness of the pop/jazz/hard-rock fusion that makes his work unique.

Two "Zanzibar" and "Stiletto" feature nice jazz passages, the former for trumpet, bass and drums, the latter for sax and piano. However, the heart of the latter is marred by an insufferable beat "a-trudged" that is far from subtle.

The Latin "Rosalinda's Eyes" is one of the better cuts on the album. Not content with the evocative vibradone, nylon-stringed guitar, and luscious percussion, Joel uses a soprano saxophone which a far less imaginative songwriter would have used a flute. The best number, "Honesty," is a closely plangent, slow version of "The Stranger," opening with a modified version of "The Stranger," the verse is much closer to "Vienna" off of the 1977 album.

It's not that this album lacks variety or anything for one to appreciate. The big band jazz opening to "Half a Mile Away," with horns orchestrated by Dave Grusin, is a soulful, and attractive opening to what turns out to be just another top-40 type song. The next track, "Until the Night," features a lush of string orchestra with Joel singing in the very low end of his range, where he sounds far better than must rock vocalists who stray from their normal tessitura.

On the final song of the album, Joel has a surprise for us as he does with the Streisand. On the latter, the last track is an entitled instrumental on the "Streisand" (home on 2nd Street), the title cut refrain from becoming homogenized and retains its jazz flavor throughout. The rest of the album loses, and loses big. In seeking comparison to Streisand's box-office hit (i.e. "polish") that had crept into 2nd Street, Joel overreacted, giving us a confessional history of his entire career on the brief but well-hidden gems that only partially redeem this album.

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Wings: the mind speaks


By Leigh J. McCann

Wings is a fascinating theatrical study of the mind and its insurmountable dependence on language. It is hardly a play, but rather the stream of consciousness of a stroke victim struggling to regain her speech.

The play opens with Mrs. Stilton (Constance Cummings) reading in a comfortable table chair. Immediately later she experiences a stroke. The stage goes dark, noises and crashes abound, as Mrs. Stilton, through symbolic dark whirling, screens pass mirrors until she is buzzed by nurses. The story accounts her struggle to regain her ability to speak in the setting of a rehabilitation center. Cummings' fine acting and detailed facial expression convey the suffering and frustration Mrs. Stilton experiences. Much of her verbalization of thoughts recounts her youth as a pioneer aviator.

While of course more, much more than simply the dramatization of the rehabilitation process, surprisingly doesn't attempt to articulate a theme. Rather, in the words of playwright Arthur Kopit, "Wings is an adventure, a quest, a mystery of a woman who becomes progressively agitated by her condition, and indeed, it is a warm and revealing study."

Kopit's interest grew out of his study of the rehabilitation of stroke victims. When his father suffered an extreme stroke, writing about it provided an outlet for him. While visiting his father at the center, he met a fascinating woman in her early '70's who was once a pioneer aviator. She suffered from severe aphasia, a language disturbance, a result of her stroke-induced brain-damage. Kopit extensively researched the condition and began writing a play based on the woman. Wings was first performed on Earplay, a National Public Radio series, where Madden directed it. Kopit adapted it for the stage, and it was performed by Yale's Repertory Theater.

Though much of the playwright's success is derived from Kopit's strong script and Cummings' fine performance, the strong contribution of director John Madden, setting by Andrew Jackness, lighting by Tom Schraeder, and costume design by Curtis (i.e. "polish") that had crept into 2nd Street, Joel overreacted, giving us a confessional history of his entire career on the brief but well-hidden gems that only partially redeem this album.