



Legends Dietrich and Piaf
belt it out onstage

Description

The spectacular English world premiere of *The Angel and the Sparrow*

By Byron Toben



The *Angel and the Sparrow* is a play with music about the friendship between two 20th century entertainment icons, **Marlene Dietrich** and **Édith Piaf**. This work was first created in Vienna and has since become a hit in Germany, Switzerland and the Czech Republic. The production at Montreal's **Segal Centre** is its world premiere in English – kudos to **Lisa Rubin** and the Segal crew for pulling off this coup.

The playwrights, **Daniel Grobe Boyman** and **Thomas Kahry**, are both actors and musicians as well. They visited Montreal to participate in the Sunday at the Segal panel discussion just before the opening preview. That panel, chaired by CJAD's **Sarah Deshaies**, also included director **Gordon Greenberg**. Musical director **Jonathan Munro** and adaptor **Erin Shields** "North Americanized" the original translation by **Sam Madwar**.

One fear at that panel was that Quebec audiences, particularly the younger ones, while steeped in Piaf lore, might be unfamiliar with Dietrich. I was not so sure, having noted that her first classic film, *The Blue Angel* often plays at the Cinémathèque Québécoise. (My friend, the late Bob Sickinger, actually wrote a musical based on that film, which played to some aplomb at a workshop in Westchester County, New York. I hope to mount a concert version of it here sometime.)

The Talents

What a stellar cast the Segal Centre has assembled!

Louise Pitre (Piaf) has won 4 Dora Mayor Moore awards (including one for Piaf) and starred in many musicals and TV shows in Canada and the US. Really wears her heart on her sleeve, as did Piaf the waif. Pitre really knocked *Non, je ne regrette rien* out of the box to prolonged audience applause. Here is the original Edith singing same.

Carly Street (Dietrich), last seen here at the Centaur as a dominatrix in *Venus in Furs*, is appropriately an organized ice queen in contrast to Piaf. Marlene, an anti-Nazi German, became a naturalized US citizen and, like Bob Hope, toured US camps overseas during WW II to bolster troop morale. **Lucinda Davis** plays all the other women in the show. "Cindy", a local favourite, who has many leading or solo credits, seems to have now also cornered the "all other roles" market, what with lots of quick changes in *Book of Bob* and *39 Steps*.

Here, the songs are the thing, topping even the wonderful acting, story and staging.

Likewise **Joe Matheson**, an alum of both the Shakespeare and Shaw festivals, performs all the other men, which include Piaf's great love, French boxing champ **Marcel Cerdan**, who died in an airplane crash while flying to visit her in New York. So a shout out to Stage Manager **Elaine Normandeau**, who had her hands full with so much to do with the overflowing Dietrich gowns designed by costumer **Louise**



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acting, story and staging. What a chore it must have been to decide which of the hundreds of songs associated with this dynamic duo were to be boiled down to the twenty in the show (actually 23, as three were reprised). I calculate Marlene sings eight, Edith seven, the both together, five and Joe (as "singer"), two. Anyway, obligatory are Piaf's most famous two, *La vie en rose* and *Non, je ne regrette rien*. In between, Edith includes such as *Padam, padam* (which sounds to me to have possibly influenced the beat of a later generation **Jacques Brel**), *Mon dieu*



and *Bravo pour le clown*. Ms Pitre has also released an album of her Piaf songs available at the centre. Marlene sings a more Americanized list like *Falling in Love Again*, *I Wish You Love* and *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* It was taken by *Lilli Marlene*, which both the Allied and Axis military loved. Goebbels sought to ban Marlene's German version but relented. The English version was sung by many. For comparison, here are Dietrich and **Vera Lynn** (of *White Cliffs of Dover* fame) each rendering the tune.

Endings

Ms Lynn, by the way, is still around at 101 in England.

Dietrich did live until 90, dying in Paris in 1992, the last 10 years of this flamboyant social butterfly spent in seclusion, mirroring the last years of her much more private Nordic film goddess rival, **Greta Garbo**, who passed at 85 in New York in 1990.

Piaf left this mortal coil in South France at only age 47 in 1963.

Life, however prolonged, is fleeting, but song and melody last much longer than stone statues especially in this age of Internet.

I highly recommend this show before it ends or moves to Toronto and New York.

The Angel and the Sparrow runs at the Segal until May 6. Now extended until May 13.

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