

Theater: Cush Jumbo Delights In One-Woman Show

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JOSEPHINE AND I *** out of ****
JOE'S PUB AT THE PUBLIC

Entertainer Josephine Baker is such a rich and fascinating character, it's no wonder she's been the focus of award-winning TV movies, novels, biographies, documentaries and even [a full-blown musical starring Deborah Cox](#) that launches in Florida this spring. After all, Baker was a gawky kid abandoned by her father, kicked out by her mother and with little to recommend but a desire to be in the spotlight. Yet unlike countless others who felt they deserved attention, Baker earned it with clowning around, frenetic dancing, sexiness and that indefinable magnetism of a true star.

She escaped from small town nowhere, got in a chorus line and then clawed and fought and shimmied her way up to a show on Broadway... and then topped that by heading to Paris and becoming a legend. She caused a scandal with her topless "exoticism," played a significant role in the French Resistance during WWII, worked her way through feckless lovers both male and female, fought hard for civil rights in America, made and spent loads of money and generally seemed to have a ball. You can't dramatize her life: she already beat you to it!

That hasn't stopped actress Cush Jumbo, who was so good in that all-female production of Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse and has been a rising star in the UK for a few years now. Jumbo wrote and stars in Josephine And I, a one-woman show about the inspiration she drew from this glamorous creature who Jumbo exclaimed looks just like her! (Not exactly. Baker is the classic ugly duckling who draws you in with sheer willpower; Jumbo is just downright lovely.)

One-person shows about an historical figure often become a parade of incident as the performer offers up parents, partners, competitors and of course the star attraction herself. Jumbo neatly breaks this up by regularly interjecting her own story, quietly but convincingly showing how the details may be different but the struggles for equality for women and people of color and artists who must strive to balance career and family? Well, those go on.

Here's the smart and engaging Jumbo, dressing down as only the most attractive people can, discussing what Josephine Baker means to her.

The piece is ably directed by Phyllida Lloyd (who also did that brilliant Julius Caesar), with tech elements that are supportive without ever being intrusive. I especially loved the way they evoked one of her famous dances: Jumbo just poses in front of a screen with still images of another dancer appearing behind her, each image offering a different pose in contrast to Jumbo's and increasing in frequency. Quite beautifully, they make you feel the excitement of the dance even though Jumbo barely moves a muscle. Clever!

Jumbo herself stretches every muscle, playing old men, a hateful mother, friends and companions and Baker herself from a little girl to a wizened warrior. Oh, and she sings!

So the structure of the play is at first effective; dialogue lifted from Baker's life goes cheek by jowl with Jumbo's own story. It keeps Josephine And I fresher than your usual one-person show. However, the drama of Jumbo's

life becomes increasingly intrusive as the play goes on, interrupting the flow with of-the-moment crises that are unconvincing and frankly less interesting than the crises in Baker's life, no matter how well Jumbo acts them out.

I wish the play had been slightly more conventional and just kept Jumbo's bursts of personal commentary casual and informed rather than turning them into a story of its own. (My guest of impeccable taste, by the way, didn't mind in the least and found the entire show the best he'd seen in ages.)

Nonetheless, it did everything one could ask of any young playwright and performer. Josephine and I makes you more interested in Josephine Baker than you were before and determined to see Cush Jumbo in anything you can.

Here's video of Baker in her triumphant performance in London in 1974.

And here's Baker in an **NSFW video**, dancing the Charleston Baby. Shocking!

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Da no rating

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.