

# Bravin' it to Broadway: "The Countess of Storyville"

**By Daniel Parra Mejia and Ellen Johnson | CW Staff**



*"The Countess of Storyville" chronicles the events of a legal red light district of New Orleans in 1910. Photo courtesy of Jamie Schor*

It isn't often that a theatrical production makes a stop in Alabama while on its way to Broadway.

This week, UA Theatre and Dance will bring to life "The Countess of Storyville," a new show that is in the working stages of getting to Broadway.

"The Countess of Storyville," based on real events and people, chronicles the happenings of Storyville, the legal red light district of New Orleans in 1910. Margot Astrachan, the lead producer of the show who has

been working to bring the production to Alabama, described the story as authentic.

"A lot of what you will see is based on events that actually happened and people who actually lived there," Astrachan said. "A lot of it you couldn't make up anyway. It's wild."

Storyville was created in 1897 but was shut down within 20 years. During that time, jazz and ragtime were born. "Storyville" follows these events.

"It's really a story about a place and how it affected the people who lived there and how it came and went," Astrachan said. "The music is very New Orleans, and when you close your eyes, you know where you are and when you were there."

The Alabama production of this show follows after a series of workshops in New York and a lab at the Pasadena Playhouse. After this week's run of the show, the production team will work towards their ultimate goal: Broadway.

"It's a Broadway-sized show, so we are really going to see what we've got after next week," Astrachan said. "A normal course of events is that it would do another regional production and [then] go to Broadway. My fingers and toes are crossed."

Mary Catherine Waltman, a senior majoring in musical theatre, plays the role of Celine in the show.

"She's basically a young woman who has come to Storyville in search of finding herself and something for her to do," Waltman said. "She comes to New Orleans to make a future for herself. She finds love and acceptance and becomes a woman."

Waltman, who has had roles in UA productions of "Urinetown," "The Dining Room" and "42nd Street," has enjoyed the chance to develop a new character, one who has not been played by anyone else before.

"I think my favorite part of this show has been creating a character," Waltman said. "It's not a normal everyday thing when you get to portray a character no one else has done before. But it's also kind of scary because you don't have a point of reference."

Waltman was able to find aspects of feminism in this production.

"It's very relatable, and it's a great for women," Waltman said. "There are a lot of strong women in this show. It's a really good, positive thing that people need to see."

Daniel Velasquez, a senior majoring in musical theatre, plays the role of Perez, a soldier who falls in love with the Countess of Storyville. He has enjoyed the opportunity to work with both students and

professionals on this production.

“They brought New York and Los Angeles actors with experience in Broadway to play the main roles, which is awesome for me as a student because I have learned a lot from them,” Velasquez said. “It’s a great experience for me because we have created a kind of friendship and a pairing way to work in the set.”

“The Countess of Storyville” will run at the Marian Gallaway Theatre Tuesday through Friday. Tickets can be purchased online or at the box office in Rowand-Johnson Hall.

“What’s important about it is that it’s a story about a woman of color with great courage to stand up to white establishment under the toughest circumstances, in a time when women didn’t do that to begin with,” Astrachan said. “The fact that she eventually prevails is extraordinary. It’s a beautiful, glamorous show, but it’s really about something. It’s not a frivolous piece of work.”