

Jazz

Rebecca Ferguson

St James Theatre, SW1

★★★★☆

Should an *X Factor* star be allowed within shouting distance of Billie Holiday's songs? The jazz police take a dim view of that kind of irreverence. In the end, though, only the most blinkered of purists could have objected to Rebecca Ferguson's spirited display — more Aretha than Billie, admittedly, but full of passion and intelligence.

You can expect to see plenty of tributes to Lady Day in this, her centenary year, but Ferguson's must be counted one of the bravest. After all, it could easily have gone so badly wrong. There were certainly moments here — as on forthcoming album, *Lady Sings the Blues* — when her singing tipped over into brassy, nu-soul hectoring, yet they were few and far between.

Much of the credit must go to her musical director and drummer Troy Miller, who led his sextet through supple and unhackneyed arrangements that evoked memories of the Ray Charles band at its funkier. With Femi Temowo laying down effervescent guitar lines, while

Graeme Flowers and Graeme Blevins formed a crisp, two-man horn section, the backing never once flirted with R&B bombast or cocktail hour muzak.

In between standards — some from beyond the Holiday songbook — Ferguson became a Liverpudlian girl-next-door, chatting hesitantly and making wry references to the amply documented turbulence of her private life. The skeleton of a script would make a huge difference. Still, when she slipped into a memorably sultry Latin vamp on *My Man*, she made the song her own. The designer gown and the vertigo-inducing heels may have belonged on the red carpet — after recently giving birth to her third child, she looks fabulous — but the voice was unashamedly earthy.

Clive Davis

**Box office: 0844 264 2140, to Feb 21.
Then Mar 19-21**

