

Stoking the star

Unfettered and alive,
the only thing
missing from the
Joni Mitchell tribute
was the spark of
Mitchell herself

MUSIC

Joni Mitchell:
A Tribute in Song
At Premiere Dance Theatre
in Toronto on Tuesday

REVIEWED BY LI ROBBINS

While **Joni Mitchell** was apparently winging her way to Toronto on Tuesday, in advance of her participation in Harbourfront Centre's World Leaders: A Festival of Creative Genius, nine vocalists were braving the stage in front of an audience of *Mitchellophiles* in a related event at the Premiere Dance Theatre, called **Joni Mitchell: A Tribute in Song**.

No doubt the singers in question would have turned jelly with nerves had Mitchell actually been present, but it was difficult not to wish that she had been able to attend. In no small part because the event called out for some spark that would intensify the whole experience. Instead, it remained a pleasant enough evening (largely due to the all-star backing band led by keyboardist Aaron Davis), but one with few exceptional moments.

Each singer chose two of Mitchell's songs to interpret, in some cases sticking to "faithful rendition" mode, as was the case with sweet-voiced Suzie Vinnick's versions of *Woodstock* and *Big Yellow Taxi*. In others there were radical departures, notably Ember Swift's challenging, deconstructed, and unfortunately almost unintelligible version of *Lesson in Survival*. (And if there's one thing you don't want obscured in a Mitchell song it's the words.)



PATTI GOWER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Jane Siberry, whose performance managed to be very Siberry without sacrificing one Mitchell nuance of lyric.

The concept of a tribute concert immediately raises questions about the role of the performer. In honouring Mitchell, whose typically complex music meets equally complex ideas and lyrics, it seems incumbent on the performer to serve the song first and foremost. Which needn't be to the detriment of individual style. On the contrary, the singers who best understood this role turned in the most charismatic performances. Case in point, Jane Siberry's rendition of *Sisotowbell Lane*, delicately understated, sung with grace and conviction, managed to be very Siberry without sacrificing one Mitchell nuance of lyric. Or David Sereda, whose interpretation of *Hejira* showed how an artist can inhabit the tidal wave of emotion behind each Mitchell

phrase, yet still be true to himself — in Sereda's case, the world of musical theater and cabaret. Tuku, a jazz, R & B and gospel singer also took the inspiration Mitchell provided to let *Woman of Heart and Mind* soar.

Had Mitchell been present, there certainly would have been at least one other reward for her own "chicken scratching" for immortality, to borrow words from *Hejira*. She would have borne witness to more than the seasoned performers of her own generation, but also to the younger performers like Emm Gryner, Martina Sorbara, and the aforementioned Ember Swift, who use Mitchell's clear vision to fuel their own vistas.

Special to The Globe and Mail