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Escape to Paris, with showbiz dreams: Karla Mosley, left, and Lenelle Moïse in "Expatriate."

Ah Paris, Beacon of Freedom, City of Jazz

With all the theater out there, how inspiring it is to be reminded how invigorating an Off Broadway play can be with just two appealing performers, compelling

THEATER REVIEW

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music and a searching, intelligent script. Lenelle Moïse, a poet, playwright and performer, has written, composed and stars in "Expatriate," a two-woman production at the Culture Project that delivers on all counts.

In the first act the play follows the best friends Claudie (Ms. Moïse) and Alphine (Karla Mosley) from childhood in the Boston projects to New York. Understated, earnest Claudie, in dreadlocks, attends Juilliard while exuberant but needy Alphine, in a glittery short dress, works briefly as a stripper and sings at jazz gigs. Though Alphine goes out with Omar, Claudie's ne'er-do-well twin, a rising hip-hop star, it's clear the women reserve their

"Expatriate" continues through Aug. 3 at Culture Project, 55 Mercer Street, at Broome Street, SoHo; (212) 352-3101; cultureproject.org.

Expatriate Culture Project

greatest support for each other.

When Omar dies, Claudie, despondent, flees to Paris, where she falls in love and moves in with a woman. Alphine follows her there, and the two find success as the singing duo Black Ve-

Best friends follow in the footsteps of Josephine Baker.

nus. As they struggle to define their relationship, Alphine goes solo, succumbing to the temptations of fame and substance abuse. Claudie emerges from under her shadow and finds her own inner star.

With the Black Venus numbers, the play breaks out its big musical guns, suggesting the glory of the stage but with minimal fuss. Ms. Moïse's compositions,

enhanced by Nick Moore's music direction and sound design, are often recorded percussive vocals accompanied by live singing. The stripped-down result is effective. Nicco Annan's choreography and Stephen Arnold's unobtrusive projection design also make an impact.

Ms. Moïse has written a thoughtful narrative laden with observations about childhood, black identity in the United States and abroad, and the cost of show business on performers. As directed by Tamilla Woodard, it never lags nor gets ahead of itself. But the production's greatest asset is Ms. Moïse and Ms. Mosley's heavenly symmetry, entwined in dialogue and song.

Ms. Mosley's contribution cannot be underestimated. She calibrates Alphine's decline with subtlety, bringing out her shrill, brittle insecurities and petty vanities organically, without undue pyrotechnics. You see the result but know where it came from.

Claudie has her own transformation. When she tears into the song "Rebel" toward the end, it's as if a spirit has been passed on — of Nina Simone, of Josephine Baker, of Alphine.