

About-ready-for-prime-time production centers on FBI's Josephine Baker file

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Author: THOMAS CRONE

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When Paul Guzzardo began his nightclub, Cabool, in the emerging Washington Avenue club district about five years ago, he envisioned a room that would tie together the urban sensibilities of the block around it, the emerging technology of Webcasting and, sure, a little bit of dance music.

The room was sleek and modern, incorporating the old with the new. Magazines from Europe, if not St. Louis, took notice of this bold space. Cabool, like many clubs along Washington, didn't have a long life, but it put certain energies in motion.

It's perhaps fitting, then, that Guzzardo's latest project dovetails with his experience at Cabool. "Secret: The Josephine Baker FBI File" tells an old story with new technology -- and a bit of dance music. Its subject is a woman born to St. Louis who found her fame as a performer in Europe beginning in the mid-1920s, and as a member of the French Resistance during World War II. It also hopes to appeal to an audience looking for substance -- and surprise -- along with style.

Guzzardo, an innovator and activist in the local digital-arts field, says his production isn't the calmest beast to tame. He's working with a trio of main actors, plus some supporting cast members. He also has a live DJ, Leon Lamont, creating music on the spot. And there's a wealth of mixed-media projections driving forward the narrative plot, which, as the title suggests, deals with Josephine Baker's complex relationship with J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, which suspected her, wrongly, of communist activities. [Zlatko Cosic](#) and Kathy Corley produced much of the video work, and a variety of musicians also contributed tracks.

"That's what's causing me to take medication right now," Guzzardo jokes. "It's a complete integration of the databanks and the actors. That's the leap. We're creating this tango between the actors, the databank and a live DJ, keeping it all going without dropping things. Now, all facets of it are coming together. And there is a narrative script, a narrative model. That creates a great deal more difficulty than just dealing with media collage."

Tying all the production's disparate strands together are the 400-plus pages of Baker's FBI dossier, a heavily marked document that shows the intense interest that the agency had in the theatrical star throughout her life.

"This story's about the role of the expatriate in the world today," Guzzardo suggests. "That's what this is all about."

The project has been coming together for a few years but never in this exact form. Originally, pieces of the work were created for a summer 2002 multimedia performance downtown. The recent First Night celebration also saw bits of the work projected at the Pulitzer Foundation.

After a two-weekend run in St. Louis, a video version of the production will be installed in a gallery at Western Illinois University in Macomb.

Even Guzzardo is curious about how the show will look in its final form.

"Ask me in a week," he says. "This is totally new for me. I'm keeping my fingers crossed." Secret: The Josephine Baker FBI File When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 3 p.m. Sunday through March 6 Where: Mildred E. Bastian Center, St. Louis Community College at Forest Park, 5600 Oakland Avenue How much: \$4 general admission; \$2 for seniors and students; free for anyone with a St. Louis Community College affiliation More info: 314-644-9386 or www.secretbaker.com