High-kicking Lewis spreads excitement in campus show

By Elizabeth O'Keefe

High-kicking entertainer Jenifer Lewis spread excitement throughout the Performing Arts Center March 23 with her performance of "From Billy to Lena with Jenny."

Lewis has performed on Broadway in such shows as "Dreamgirls," "Eubie" and "Ain't Misbehavin'." Her one-woman performance was sponsored by the University Committee for Lectures, Films and Concerts, the Student Board of Governors and the Minority Aesthetics Program.

"Billy to Lena" is Lewis' celebration of black history. Her show briefly reviews the lives and talents of the seven black women singers who influenced her the most: Billie Holiday, Ethel Waters, Mahalia Jackson, Dinah Washington, Aretha Franklin, Tina Turner and Lena Horne.

"If these women didn't do what they did so well, I wouldn't be here doing what I do so well," Lewis explained.

Lewis, sparkling in a gold lame jumpsuit, was accompanied by a piano player. She not only made use of the piano musically, but physically as well — jumping on top, demonstrating the "bold, lusty arrogance" of Dinah Washington's "Evil Gal."

Lewis good-naturedly chaffed her idols, making each song her own without losing the spirit of the seven women.

Lewis answered questions from the audience after the show. She advised them to "take the stairs to success because the elevator is broken."

"Jenifer Lewis on the Couch," written by Lewis, will open April 19 off-Broadway in New York.

Lewis, originally from Kinloch, Missouri, moved to New York because, "New York is bigger than life and so am I," she said.