

SAN FRANCISCO

by Richard Connema

Souvenir, The Government Inspector and The Student Gypsy

A Tantalizing Production of *Souvenir*

San Jose Repertory is currently presenting Stephen Temperley's wildly funny *Souvenir* through April 20th. Many people are not aware of Florence Foster Jenkins, a socialite and singer of the 1930s and '40s who unwittingly desecrated a ruthless classical repertoire.

I had several of Jenkins' RCA recordings, and she had a voice like a crow in heat. I missed her famous Carnegie Concert in September, 1944, since I was on bivouac in the wilds of New Jersey just outside Fort Dix, but my Army buddy who saw the show said I missed the comic performance of a lifetime.



Mark Anders and Patti Cohenour

Souvenir is entertaining and ultimately poignant. The two hour and thirty minute, "fictional biography" covers the life of society matron Florence Foster Jenkins (Patti Cohenour) beginning in 1927 when she hires 29-year-old musician Cosme McMoon (Mark Anders) as a recital pianist. Florence firmly believes she has perfect pitch and gives her first charity recital in the Ritz Carlton ballroom.

Florence's friends don't tell her how bad she is, and her caterwauling develops a following. Audiences would stifle themselves from laughing out loud; some would run up the aisle to try to contain their laughter. One might say that she really is tone deaf and has no idea how bad she sounds.

The second act is a Reader's Digest version of the infamous concert of September, 1944, for the armed forces at Carnegie Hall. It is accented by Marcia Dixey Jory's outlandish fussy costumes and highlighted by Florence's deference to her devoted pianist, as she performs his Mexican "Serenata" looking like a camp Carmen. Classical music purists beware, since Florence butchers every song. She changes her costume for each, and they are the wildest costumes you will ever see. When she sings "Ave Maria" she looks like the Statue of Liberty. Her rendition of the Franz Schubert song is a comic glee.

Patti Cohenour (Broadway *Light in the Piazza*, *Sound of Music*) reprising her role from ACT in Seattle, is brilliant as Florence Foster Jenkins. Whether singing or speaking, she is an absolute delight. In many of the scenes she reminds me of the late film actress Billie Burke. At the end of the production she sings the way Jenkins hears it in her mind. This is a magnificent and exquisite rendition of "Ave Maria."

Mark Anders (*2 Pianos , 4 Hands*), who also played his role in Seattle, does a lovely job both as actor and accompanist. He is wonderfully droll in his remarks to the audience as Cosme admits he needs the steady income as pianist to Jenkins. ("I was already twenty-nine and losing my hair".) He becomes very sympathetic to the singer, especially in the scene in which Florence Foster Jenkins is being laughed at during the Carnegie Hall concert.

Eddie Whitsett has designed a New York night scene in the background on an almost bare stage with several props, such as chairs, used in the course of the evening. The piano is very dominant, and lighting by Rick Paulson is effective. R. Hamilton Wright's direction is right on the mark.

Souvenir runs through April 20th at the San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. For tickets call 408-367-7255 or visit www.SJRep.com.