

Director finds 'timeless truths' in the jazz, life of Fats Waller

By [Karen D'Souza](#)

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Kent Gash is an old hand at getting the joint jumpin.' He's directed five revivals of the classic foot-stomping musical revue "Ain't Misbehavin' " over the years.

Now Gash, who recently left Atlanta's Alliance Theatre for a teaching gig at New York University, is bringing his latest incarnation of the Fats Waller revue to San Jose Repertory Theatre.

Showcasing 32 vintage tunes, including "T'aint Nobody's Bizness," "I Can't Give You Anything But Love," "Honeysuckle Rose" and the title song, this tribute to the music of the Harlem Renaissance runs through April 18 at the Rep. Gash recently took a few minutes to chat about what makes "Misbehavin' " such a magnet for him and why now is the right time to revive the Tony-winning show, which first opened on Broadway back in 1978.

Q You have directed this show a handful of times. What keeps pulling you back to the material?

A Of all the revues in the American musical theater, I think this is greatest of them all. The music is glorious. Fats Waller was a musical legend, and his legacy is gigantic. The musical captures the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance and the power of jazz, which is the great American art form.

Q Do you approach a revival differently than you do a new play?

A No, for me the process is the same. You try to get inside the head of Fats Waller. You get inside his life, his appetite for life and his work. We spent a lot of time researching the time period and the truth of his experiences. When you see the show, you should feel like you've spent an evening with Fats. That's the joy of the show and the truth. There's great comedy here, great wit and, of course, great music, but there are also timeless truths about humanity and relationships that are the hallmarks of great art. The level of invention is infectious.

Q What qualities were you looking for in the cast?

A Well, they have to be great singers, because these songs have to be done right. You can't fake the music. They also needed a sense of wit and a big heart. That's something you either have or you don't. It can't be taught. You've just got to have it if you are going to capture the sensuality of this universe. You have to have an appetite for life and a sense of abundance about life, because that's the world of Fats Waller.

Q San Jose is the last stop in this production. How has the show evolved along the way?

A It continues to grow throughout the performance process. It's a question of the performers sitting more deeply in the characters and in the universe of the play.

Q What was the most challenging scene to stage?

A "This Joint is Jumpin.' " It's basically a one-act play in and of itself. It's a rent party that goes crazy, and it demands a lot from the performers at a crucial point in the production, right at the end of Act 1, just when they have been singing and dancing their faces off for three songs in a row.

Q What inspired you to revive such an old chestnut now?

A It's always worthwhile to do this show, because as time goes by, we get further and further away from this history. There are a lot of people for whom this world is brand new, especially young people. They don't know this music, this universe, this time period. There are a lot of things in the show that strike young people as startlingly contemporary when, in fact, they are quite historical.

Q That's fascinating. Can you give me an example?

A No, that would rob those moments of their surprise. It's like a revelation for young people, the timelessness of these themes. That's the great gift of doing this show now. It's equally satisfying for people who know these songs by heart and are seeing the show for the umpteenth time as well as delightful for those who are discovering it for the first time. That's how you know you are in the hands of a musical genius.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Check out her theater reviews, features and blog at www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza.

"Ain't Misbehavin"

Music by Thomas "Fats" Waller

Through: April 18

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

Tickets: \$35-\$74; 408-367-7255, www.sjrep.com