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theater

'Ain't Misbehavin' at San Jose Rep

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Fun and naughty from a by-gone era

When Christopher Morgan appears suspended above the sets of the San Jose Repertory's current production of *Ain't Misbehavin'*, he's shirtless, his pants held up (just) by a pair of glittery suspenders. As he's lowered slowly to the stage, singing Fats Waller's "The Viper's Drag," he flaunts his well-muscled physique, writhing snake-like and exuding forbidden sexuality and the focused intention of a bad boy out to conquer and abandon.

The song intertwines easily with "The Reefer Song," which tells of his dream of a 5-foot-long reefer. He runs his tongue, flickering like a serpent's along the imaginary paper of that enormous—and now hallucinogenic—weed cigarette. He's out to set the audience on fire; he twirls, even the muscles on the muscles of his muscular back ripple. As he tells a woman in the audience, "I got nothin' to do and a long day to do it in." Two women in the audience shout out in unison, "Honeysuckle!"

The cry refers to an earlier song, "Honeysuckle Rose," sung by Oakland born and raised Ken Robinson, whose mellifluous baritone poured out into the audience with warmth and soft, amber sweet tones. He squeezed as much out of each note as possible in this lingering and affectionate rendition of one of era's cleverest love songs.

The songs are part of the snazzy, jazzy revue of Fats Waller songs that opened last night at the San Jose Repertory. The men are joined by a trio of women—Rebecca Covington, Angela Grovey and Aurelia Williams—who form their own vibrant trio, when they aren't flirting and sassing their male companions. Big, luscious and beautiful, Grovey and Williams have voices that penetrate the listener like a set of glittering stilettos. Grovey covering the middle-high range and Williams' voice scaling something like Mount Everest.

Covington bounces between super low and bone-shakingly high in her comic parody of amateur theatrics, "Yacht Club Swing." She and Morgan dance a gorgeous jitterbug, and later she flies through her own ecstatic solo, while Grovey and Williams look on with dismay.

The most expressive and tenderly beautiful piece was the 1929 song "Black and Blue" with lyrics by Andy Razaf. A concise and moving description of the pain of racism: "I'm white inside .../ My only sin ... is in my skin/ What did I do ... to be so black and blue," the song is stylishly arranged and sung with a minimum of staging: the singers seated in chairs on the darkened stage, each singing a phrase of lyrics harmonically and in repeating sequences.

The five singer/dancers are backed up by Darryl Ivey, playing keyboards and a formidable stride piano, and a sextet of brass, bass and percussion. The whole concoction was thought up by Murray Horwitz and Richard Maltby Jr.—both long-time Broadway theater practitioners. The stage director was Kent Gash. My one wish was that they had given us more about the man who wrote these pieces. In some ways, despite the glamour, energy and talent of everyone involved, the review *Ain't Misbehavin'* remains a rather abstract homage.

—Jaime Robles

Ain't Misbehavin' continues at the San Jose Repertory Theater through April 18. For information and tickets, call 408-367-7255 or visit www.sjrep.com.



Photo: Rebecca Covington and Christopher Morgan in San Jose Repertory Theatre's production of *Ain't Misbehavin'* by Tim Fuller