

Ain't Misbehavin': A Reimagining that Bodes Ill for the Modern Imagination

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Fats Waller, the early jazz musician, found success in paradox. As a pianist, he was all flourish; as a singer, all foible. His hands built him up, the right flitting through frills on top of the left's ragtime rhythm, but his words knocked him down: "I don't stay out late/No place to go/I'm home about eight/Just me and my radio." This juxtaposition, however, was less conflict than it was self-celebration. Whether showing off or self-deprecating, Fats Waller was, in the end, an endearing but incorrigible ham, and it is this aspect of his musicianship that *Ain't Misbehavin'*, a tribute to his work currently running at San Jose Repertory Theatre, best captures:

The vocalists absolutely spellbind with their solos. But at the same time, the production's over-arranged ensemble numbers sterilize Waller's spirit and style. The conventions of musical, here glitzed up only further by director Kent Gash, seem to run counter to the very essence of jazz, which begs an important question: Why even make Waller's songs into a musical when they're so eminently suited for a cabaret?

The designers clearly wrestled with this dilemma. The set, by designer Emily Beck, with its plush reds and mauves under low lighting, with tiny alcohol-laden tables abutting risers for the live jazz orchestra, evokes the nightclub in the film *Stormy Weather* (in which Waller appears). When they're not singing, the performers take up residence at the tables and partake of alcohol, cueing us to respond as a cabaret audience, which prompts more hootin' and hollerin' than San Jose Rep is probably used to.

The singers, though, hoot and holler right back. In his performance of "The Viper's Drag," Christopher L. Morgan flicks his tongue like a snake and lights his cigarette with sweeping arm motions. As he descends into the audience to flirt with nearby females, the smoke from his prop seems to emanate from his bare chest. The other male vocalist, Ken Robinson, waxes serpentine on a number of his own. In "Honeysuckle Rose," he elongates his sibilant S's with the veneer of extemporaneity, a true jazz musician riffing on his own desire. Each performer, it seems, picks a single solo on which to whip out the guns otherwise mysteriously kept in their holsters. Angela Grovey masterfully follows another showstopper on "Mean to Me"; Rebecca Covington fills the auditorium with "Keepin' Out of Mischief Now"; Aurelia Williams makes ecstatic the line, "When you kiss me, Daddy, I stay kissed," in "Squeeze Me."

These performances, accompanied by a virtuoso jazz band under the musical direction of Darryl G. Ivey, should be enough reward for the ticket price. Unfortunately, the show goes on too long, padded by less charismatic numbers and some ill-conceived choreography by Byron Easley. On "Handful of Keys," for instance, the performers line up to suggest the keys of a piano, but Easley anchors them to their chairs and has them mime playing the instrument with their fingers. What's more, director Gash misses much of Waller's humor. On "Your Feet's Too Big" and "Fat and Greasy," Robinson seems unsure whether to play the jokes subtly or to take them over the top. Either way, he's a halfbeat behind the timing on Waller's original recordings without adding anything in the dead air.

Ain't Misbehavin' lacks a storyline. Its show tunes are pastiche. Should it be treated as a musical? Should it be staged in such a large house? If this is the only way to keep jazz alive, maybe it's better suited to a museum of history.

Ain't Misbehavin' continues until April 18 at SJRT, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. For tickets (\$35-\$74) call (408) 367-7255 or at SJRep.com.



Christopher L. Morgan in Ain't Misbehavin'. PHOTO BY TIM FULLER