

Review: 'Ain't Misbehavin' is slow to heat but hits smokin' hot levels at San Jose Rep

By Karen D'Souza

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Don't let the title fool you, "Ain't Misbehavin'" can be quite naughty indeed. From the bodacious bumping and grinding to the Chippendale's-worthy audience interaction, this homage to the immortal Fats Waller is downright lascivious as well as swinging.

Briskly directed by Kent Gash, this San Jose Repertory Theatre revival takes a while to find its heat before scorching the audience with a smokin' hot second act where each song truly takes on a life of its own.

The foot-stomping revue, which first debuted on Broadway in 1978, pays homage to the jazz legend who came to fame during the Harlem Renaissance and went to become an American musical icon. A co-production between the Rep, Arizona Theatre Company and the Cleveland Playhouse, it runs through April 18.

Known for his lust for life, Fats gets an appropriate tribute in this sexy, high-strutting revival. The hardworking cast of five has the pipes and the moves to juice 31 different numbers. They jitterbug and jive their way through such classics as "This Joint is Jumpin'," "T'aint Nobody's Bizness If I Do" and the title song.

Make no mistake. Not all of the songs are quite as you may remember them. Double entendres come hard and heavy in this show.

"Honeysuckle Rose," for instance, gets quite an X-rated interpretation when singer Ken Robinson puts all of the emphasis on the third syllable. Wink.

Hot second act

Still, the frantic pace of the first act keeps some of the comedy from landing. Too many of the songs seems raced through. And there's not enough narration to flesh out the history of the song book. As a result, it's not until the second act that "Ain't" really gets cooking.

But once it does, it's on fire. The lithe Christopher L. Morgan slithers his way across the stage in the extremely carnal "Viper Song." Sweat drips off his bare chest as he thrusts his hips, not to mention other body parts, into the laps of several women in the front row.

From then on, catcalls and hoots were the order of the day as the cast dug deep into the psychology (and biology) of each song. Angela Grovey and Aurelia Williams shimmy up a storm in the feisty "Find Out What They Like," which is notable for its bouncing décolletage and booty-shaking abandon.

But by far the most powerful act is the "Black and Blue" number. After jumping out of their skins for hours, the cast delivers this song in stillness, each performer seated in a chair, their faces free of their customary grins.

It's a haunting tale of race in America that's a sobering counterpoint to the shenanigans that have come before.

The finale of the show takes the temperature back up to the red-hot and racy level but it's the gravitas of "Black and Blue" that really sticks with you.

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Ain't Misbehavin'

Music by Thomas "Fats" Waller

Upshot: It may take a while for the joint at the Rep to get jumpin', but once it does, it's smokin' hot.

Through: April 18

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

Running time: Just over two hours, one intermission

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