

Musical review: Five-actor play 'Ain't Misbehavin'' hits San Jose

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For the cast members of "Ain't Misbehavin'," playing nice and minding their manners proved to be an entertaining mix of innuendo and antics alike.

One song in particular, titled "Honeysuckle Rose," has lyrics that give an engrossing interpretation of a man who becomes aroused by a young lady, cleverly employing the power of suggestion to its advantage.

The actor who performed the song made it obvious what he was thinking, but said it through facial expressions that gave a wink and a nod to each sexual metaphor.

It translated to the crowd quite well as a few women who were scattered throughout the theater responded to the performer's actions with several instances of applause and muffled "whoo-hooing" throughout the song.

This Tony award-winning musical features a cast of three women and two men. The play is set in the 1920s and 1930s as African-Americans in New York experience life during the Harlem Renaissance.

Based around the musical talents of Thomas "Fats" Waller, a pianist known during the time period for his brilliant songwriting, the cast works in unison with a full jazz ensemble to illustrate a time in history when music and dance served as methods of escape from social and class distinctions.

The costumes were a genuine attempt at taking the audience back in time, as actors dressed in zoot suits, bowler hats and arm garters were accompanied by actresses in pastel attire and feather-lined headbands.

The performers emerged from a pleated velvet curtain that created a vaudeville-style atmosphere, and they performed on a stage fitted with low ambient lighting to help offset the bright glow of the spotlights.

Stage props were minimal, using little more than a couple of tables with alcoholic drinks.

The band innocuously played in the background to help set the scene of club goers who did the jitterbug to songs such as "The Joint is Jumpin'."

All these elements introduced themes of love and lust, which commingled with each other, presenting the dynamics between a man and woman in a comical and theatrical way.

With a cast of only five people, each female character played the part of a third wheel, often showing up on a date with one of her male counterparts while he was busy flirting with another actress.

The band was instrumental in helping the cast develop the setting with a sound specific to the jazz genre which dominated the club scene during the Harlem Renaissance.

According to the show's playbill, this was a period of time referred to as the "Golden Age of Jazz," when music and the Harlem Renaissance played a pivotal role in establishing the artistic identity of the African-American community, as portrayed in the lives of these five characters.

The musical element of the show supported the writer's effort in recreating this integral piece of history and acted seamlessly with the efforts of the plot.



Media Credit: San Jose Repertory Theatre

My favorite part of the show took place toward its finale with a performance of "Black and Blue," - a composition which featured all five performers in a somber digression to the musicals overall upbeat and comical approach.

For a brief moment, the number offered the audience insight into what it was like to live in a time that was as much of a struggle as it was to enjoy.

Amid all of the laughter, the performance brought another level to the show, with the cast demonstrating a degree of talent so exceptional that the audience had an emotional lapse going from giddy uproars to a silent moment of reflection.

Filled with big voices teetering between robust harmonies and soft melodies, the audience was seduced by a brazen performance given by a talented group who left the stage with their backs to a standing ovation.

Just blocks from campus, the San Jose Repertory Theatre was a short distance for an entertaining show, and it was a great way to spend a Friday night.