

AISLE SAY San Francisco

BLACK PEARL SINGS!

By Frank Higgins

Presented by San Jose Repertory Theatre

Directed by Rick Lombardo

At San Jose Repertory Theatre

101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose, CA / (408) 367-7255

Reviewed by [Judy Richter](#)

An ambitious ethnomusicologist's search for authentic songs of slavery and Africa leads her to a women's prison farm in southeast Texas in the hot summer of 1933. That's how "**Black Pearl Sings!**" by **Frank Higgins** begins. That's also what **San Jose Repertory Theatre** has chosen to open its 30th season. Overall, it's a good choice by the company's artistic director, **Rick Lombardo**, who also serves as director and sound designer for this production.

The woman in search of songs is Susannah Mullally (**Jessica Wortham**), a white researcher for the Library of Congress. Even though she has sterling credentials, she has been shut out of a teaching position at Harvard because she's female. The woman who can help with her search is Alberta "Pearl" Johnson (**Jannie Jones**), the daughter of slaves, who has been in prison for murder for 10 years. She wants to get out so that she can search for her 22-year-old daughter, with whom she has lost touch.

During their first meeting, Susannah is officious while Pearl is skeptical of her intentions. The two verbally spar and bargain, but over time, Pearl sings some songs that Susannah records. Pearl also gets Susannah to look for her daughter in Houston, but it seems her daughter has left town. However, Susannah is so enthusiastic about Pearl's songs and her ability to deliver them that she engineers a parole. The two go to Greenwich Village, where they present some well received programs.

Jones is a powerhouse singer whose Pearl brings the house down several times. She also has the meatier, more interesting role. This factor, plus her sometimes outsized performance as directed, makes for some unevenness in what should be a relationship between two women of equal worth. Even though Susannah's role is underwritten -- more back story, especially about her girlhood and parents, would help -- Wortham does well. Like Jones, she sings well, too, although her songs are mostly Appalachian folk songs as opposed to Pearl's songs, which are more overtly emotional and sometimes bawdy.

John Iacovelli's set designs for the warden's office in Act 1 and an artsy, cluttered apartment in Act 2 serve the play well, as do **Frances Nelson McSherry's** costumes and **Daniel Meeker's** lighting. **Kate McCormick** serves as vocal coach.

Despite the flawed script, it's often quite funny, with most of the best lines reserved for Pearl. It's also thought-provoking with its undertones of racism, sexism and class differences. Finally, it's powerful, especially in the final wrenching moments.