

The Broadway Critic

Theatre Review: “Black Pearl Sings” @ San Jose Rep, 09/08

09/09/2010...9:46 AM



“A Moving and Melodic Drama” is the perfect description for *Black Pearl Sings*. It’s not necessarily a musical, nor a “play with music” but a play where music functions as the central character. It becomes the most important part of the production. It’s actually a fantastic idea because music moves people in ways that words can not and so the dialogue was padded with these heart-wrenching performances of some of the greatest folk songs ever sung. With each song, Pearl Johnson (Jannie Jones) pulls you deeper and deeper into her ancestry and reminds us of the historical struggles of racial and sexual inequality that this nation still struggles with today. Although the play is set in 1933, it’s relevance is almost more poignant now than ever before.

Black Pearl Sings almost plays out like a movie and could easily be transferred to the silver screen. The plot reads as, “Susannah (Jessica Wortham), an educated, career-obsessed white woman who works as an ethnomusicologist for the Library of Congress, has a quest to find authentic, pre-slavery, African-American music. When she encounters Texas prisoner, Pearl Johnson, an unlikely partnership develops between the street-smart Pearl and the ambitious Susannah.” The first act centers around Susannah’s encounters with Pearl in the Texas prison. In the second act, when she gets pardoned by the Governor, she’s able to travel to New York City with Susannah on parole and start her life over again.

The relationship between the two women is fascinating. Class, race, stereotypes, and men are continually brought up throughout Susannah’s quest to find the most authentic song she can from Pearl. The moments that Wortham and Jones find in the material are priceless – some are hysterical, others poignant and some become almost unbearable to watch. It’s all because these two women are fiercely committed to the material and their relationship with each other. Jones’ performance was one of the strongest performances I have seen on stage this year (including all of the shows I’ve seen in London, Las Vegas, New York and the Bay Area). As a matter of fact, it was probably one of the strongest performances I have seen in a long, long time. Absolutely outstanding.

The music is woven into the piece almost seamlessly and every time that Jones opens her mouth, you don’t want her to stop singing. The music is so authentic you forget you are in a theatre, and instead it feels like you are listening to a live recording of these songs at the Library of Congress. All the music is unaccompanied, except for a few that Wortham plays on her autoharp. Both Wortham and Jones are exceptional at recreating the

exact sound of these old songs down to the correct stylization of the vowels and consonants. I only wish there was a cast recording. I would have bought it on the spot.

There wasn't a better way for San Jose Rep to open their 30th Anniversary Season. Bravo to Rick Lombardo, the director, and the rest of the artistic team. The direction, set, sound and lights were fantastic.

Again, *Black Pearl Sings* is absolutely outstanding. Make sure you get your tickets now!

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