



“BLACK PEALS SINGS” Is a pearl of a play

By Iride Aparicio



(Left to right) Jannie Jones as Pearl and Jessica Wortham as Susannah in the West Coast premiere of “Black Pearl Sings” at San Jose Repertory Theatre. Photo: Kevin Berne

SAN JOSE, California - To write that “**Black Pearl Sings**” is a wonderful musical drama would not be the correct statement. The play with music is wonderful and it certainly is dramatic but it is not a drama. If it were a drama, we certainly would be looking for its “*premise*,” and if its *premise* were: “**You always reap what you sow**” (One of the African songs that Pearl’s sings) her fame and fortune at the end, would not make any sense.

So let us just say that “**Black Pearl Sings**” which made its West Coast Premiere on September 8th at San Jose Repertory Theatre opening its 2010-2011 season and marking the 30th anniversary of its foundation, is a moving story in which playwright Frank Higgins, managed to create realistic dialogue that when spoken by two extremely talented actors: Jannie Jones, playing Alberta “Pearl” Johnson and Jessica Wortham playing Susannah Mullally, were able to captivate the audience for over two hours representing a story, directed by Rick Lombardo, that made us laugh, and think, and at the end brought tears to our eyes and the audience to their feet applauding.

We meet Alberta Johnson “Pearl” (Jones) the same day that Susannah Mullally (Wortham) meets her in the Ward’s office of a Texan “Prison Farm” (the name given to correctional facilities where hard-labor convicts are place to work in a “farm” or productive unit in the open air doing manual labor. The good produced in these farms are used to feed the prisoners or other wards or the state or sold) Pearl, and Afro American woman, enters the Ward’s room, where Susanna (Wortham) is

sitting at the desk, wearing a vertically striped prisoner's uniform dragging a heavy metal ball, attached to the chains around her ankles. Pearl, Susanna was informed, had killed a man.

Susannah (Wortham) offers her a cup of coffee and then explains to her that she is a rural educated expert in folk songs from the University of Harvard who came with a grant from the Library of Congress to collect folk songs from the jailed African Americans prisoners. The songs she is interested in must be songs dating back to the time when the Africans were brought to America as slaves. She (Susannah) had heard that Pearl sings those songs very well and would like to record her. The reaction of Pearl is rude. She cannot see why she is doing the singing (the work) yet the professor is getting paid instead of her getting paid. She also demands to be called "Miss Johnson" instead of Pearl.

After a few moments, however, the "ice" between the two women seem to melt when Susannah playing an autoharp (An stringed musical instrument with a series of chord bars attached to dampers which when depressed, mute all the strings other than those of the desire cord) begins singing with a sweet mellow voice a folk Irish song telling Pearl that her family came to the U.S.A from Ireland and that the day when she discovered the Irish song she just sang, she felt very excited. And in time, it is music, and their mutual love for music (in this case Old African folk songs) that little by little manage to bond together these two women coming from completely different upbringings: Susannah is educated, Pearl is not. Susannah is an old maid. Pearl was married. The only passion the professor has is her study of folk songs. The only passion Pearl has is a daughter.

At the beginning of the play, each uses music for a different purpose. Susannah (named after the folk song "Oh Susannah" by her mother) is only interested in getting as many songs from Pearl as possible so she could get her project accepted at the University and be given a grant. Pearl, wants to use Susannah to help her get out of jail. She needs her help to trace her daughter who lives in Louisiana. It is only after Susannah promises her that she is going to help her get out on parole that Pearl decides to cooperate with her.

Because there are only two actors in the play: Jones and Wortham, and all the action develops through their dialogue, the play allows the audience to really get to know the characters. The acting is superb and Jones really knows how to put the "right" feeling in each one of the songs. "**Black Pearl Sings**" is a pearl of a play.