



ROSSMOOR NEWS

WALNUT CREEK, CALIFORNIA

“She Loves Me,” “Compulsion” and “Black Pearl Sings”

By Charles Jarrett

An Upbeat “She Loves Me” and a Must-See “Compulsion”

Wow, I truly loved the Joe Masteroff, Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick's upbeat musical offering, “She Loves Me” presented by Center Repertory Company and currently playing at the Leshner Center for the Arts. Also, Berkeley Repertory Theatre is currently offering “Compulsion,” a stunning story about Meyer Levin's all-consuming obsession to bring a complete and faithful adaptation of the Anne Frank diary without the usual compromises. **And, San Jose Repertory presents the musical drama “Black Pearl Sings.”**

“She Loves Me”

The story of “She Loves Me” is set in a beautiful and historical city in pre-war 1930s Hungary, at a time when the depressed economy was causing employees to fret and worry about their employer's solvency and the stability of their well seasoned jobs. This romantic adventure takes place in a parfumerie, an upscale cosmetics establishment.

A new employee, Amalia Balash (Kelsey Venter), is hired by the store owner, Mr. Maraczcheck (Richard Farrell), over the prudent and conservative management decision of the store's manager, George Nowack (Ryan Drummond), who feels that they should not be adding any additional employees at that particular time.

Amalia and George immediately clash and are constantly at odds with each other in the working environment. In their off-hours, they have both answered personal ads seeking pen-pals. Unbeknownst to them, the two battling employees have become each other's pen pals. In their letters, they never actually refer to each other by their names. Through these letters, the pen-pals discover that they have many interests in common and over time this extensive communication routine has revealed a person that they both imagine and fantasize would be their perfect “life partner.”

While these two are fighting daily at work, they are making plans to meet each other in person, for the first time, at a local bistro that prides itself in catering to lovers and romantic encounters.

When the two finally meet, will the good romantic chemistry generated by the pen-pal correspondence overcome the bad working chemistry generated in the shop? Well, you will have to see this terrific musical to find out, as I will not “spill the perfume.”

Director Robert Barry Fleming has selected a truly stellar multitalented ensemble cast, each member embracing his and her supporting character as if the role were written specifically for them. This story is far greater than this simple storyline and the songs, including “Will He Like Me,” “She Loves Me” and “Days Gone By,” are a fun part of the show. All members of the cast have superb voices in addition to their excellent acting skills.

I strongly recommend to romantics everywhere seeing this heartwarming musical. It is just plain terrific.

“She Loves Me” continues through Oct. 10 in the Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive in Walnut Creek. Call 943-7469 or go to www.centerREP.org for tickets.

“Compulsion”

The fearless management of Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Tony Taccone and Susan Medak, are exploring the darker side of relationships with their powerful, evocative and moving interpretation of Rinne Groff's latest play, “Compulsion,” playing through Oct. 31.

Director Oskar Eustis has delivered a magnificent and spellbinding story to the stage, a stage that has been open to producing plays that few other theaters in this country would sponsor; a stage that is rapidly becoming the off-off Broadway trial entity for many of the new and most powerful productions opening in this country at this time.

Ever since the early 1950s, the name Anne Frank and a diary she left behind in a secret annex to her father's spice warehouse and offices have become synonymous with the horrific treatment of the Jews and their struggle for existence and survival during World War II. Millions of people worldwide have read "The Diary of a Young Girl" and yet most have no idea of the amount of debate and criticism voiced since its publication, including criticism over the editing of its content by her father, Otto Frank.

During the waning years of the war, between 1944 and 1945, a Jewish journalist, Meyer Levin, who had earned much acclaim for his reporting on the Loeb and Leopold trial in 1924, was a first-hand witness to the carnage and atrocities discovered by the American military as they freed Jewish prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. It had an overwhelming affect on his writing and his desire to inform the world of the true nature of the Jewish social and political experience. He felt unable to articulate the degree of humiliation and devastation occasioned by the horrific nature of this war on the Jews. When he was given a French version of "The Diary of a Young Girl" by his wife in 1950, he felt he had finally found his voice.

He immediately contacted Otto Frank and offered his services to create an English-translation version. He asked for no remuneration from this effort, but did request the right to adapt the finished book for the stage. When the American version of the book was published by Doubleday, it was a spectacular success, selling out its entire first printing in 10 days, due in large part to the crucial review written by Levin for the New York Times Book Review.

The story of the journey of the book to stage is the subject of this magnificent play. Author Rinne Groff has given all of the characters portrayed in her play substitute names, but the story and the events that take place are basically factual. Meyer Levin becomes Sid Silver and his character is played brilliantly by Tony-Award-winning actor, Mandy Patinkin. This may be Patinkin's most powerful work yet.

There are only two other actors who play numerous other characters, Hannah Cabell, who portrays both Miss Mermin (who takes on the real-life role of theatrical producer Cheryl Crawford) and Meyer Levin's wife, known in this play as Mrs. Silver. Matte Oslan plays a number of other characters all central to Levin's attempt to publish and produce his adaptation of the book into a stage play.

Levin became obsessed in keeping the play true to the tenor of the original diary, to retain and incorporate more of the controversial content left out of the book by Anne's father. He made demands that it be a "Jewish" work in every respect, from producers, to directors to publishing house. In so doing, Levin (Silver) alienated himself from Otto Frank and the people actually contracted legally by Frank to see the book transcend into a stage production and eventually a movie.

This is a story of a man unwilling to compromise what he saw as a young girl's dream to document explicitly her family's experience so that she could live forever through her writing. He wanted nothing changed for art's sake or societal marketing correctness, nothing to take a back seat because of the fears being raised by Joe McCarthy and the Senate hearings on un-American activities or blacklisted writers and actors.

The incorporation of marionettes to infuse the Anne Frank diary characters into Meyer Levin's world and story development works exceedingly well.

"Compulsion" is being performed on the Berkeley Repertory Thrust Stage, located at 2025 Addison Street (near Shattuck) in Berkeley. Check the website at www.berkeleyrep.org for tickets or call (510) 647-2949.

"Black Pearl Sings"

Once again, the San Jose Repertory Theater has given voice to some truly stunning, poetic and highly evocative theater with its "Black Pearl Sings," playing through Sept. 26. Author Frank Higgins was in the theater to experience the audience reaction and it must have been exciting for him to see the crowd erupt into an immediate and long-lasting standing ovation as the final scene closed and two brilliant women took their bows.

These two actresses left the audience absolutely spellbound, thrilled and upbeat as this amazing story parallels the true stories of actual work done during the Depression by dedicated educators and musicologists, hoping to restore and preserve our heritage of American folk music.

In Higgins' story, an educated, career-obsessed white woman, Susannah (Jessica Wortham), travels from southern prison to southern prison seeking songs of the South, hoping to make her mark as the only woman to be granted a permanent position working for the Library of Congress as an expert in early American ethnic and folk music.

While in a Texas prison, she encounters black prisoner, Pearl Johnson, in her search for Civil War, slavery and pre-slavery music that may have originated in Africa. Pearl (Jannie Jones) is a tough-as-nails prisoner, incarcerated for surgically relieving a man of his tool for sexual exploration and dominance when he tried to impress her 12-year-old daughter with his sexual prowess.

At the time of her meeting, Pearl is frantic, not having seen her daughter for 10 years, and is no longer receiving any communication from her. Pearl knows some music that may be her ticket out of the prison to allow her to search for her daughter, provided she can convince this musicologist of the music's importance to Susannah's work. The battles between the two begin and bartering starts to produce some progress for both women and little by little a deep heartfelt understanding blossoms and an agreement finally emerges.

Susannah finally secures a conditional pardon for Pearl, a pardon that makes the black woman subservient to the white woman's music restoration program. Pearl is taken around the East Coast performing before women's groups, while the search for her missing daughter continues, part time. Both women's objectives are finally met, although not quite as hoped for by either party. What does emerge is a deep lasting understanding and friendship that does benefit their desires and map out their future lives.

This exquisite musical drama is exciting and certainly one that I will long remember and highly recommend. I came out of the theater simply thrilled. Jones and Wortham are both impressive singers. However, when Jones sang, the temperature in the theater must have gone up several degrees, as the warmth she exuded was magnified by the audience's rapture. Wow, what a magnificent voice! What a moving and uplifting story! The production, under the direction of Rick Lombardo, is perfect in every detail.

Call 408-367-7255 for tickets or visit the website at www.sjrep.com. The San Jose Repertory Theatre is a beautiful facility, easy to reach and always rewarding. The theater is located at 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose.