

Review: 'Black Pearl Sings' at San Jose Rep

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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Kevin Berne

Jannie Jones is Alberta "Pearl" Johnson, a roots singer who is discovered in a Texas prison, in "Black Pearl Sings."

attention as soon as Jones' Alberta "Pearl" Johnson begins to sing. No matter how perfunctory the script seems at times in Artistic Director Rick Lombardo's staging, the music anchors, deepens and ultimately sells the story.

Not that this is a musical. A play with and about songs, "Pearl" has been one of the nation's most widely staged shows for two years (Sacramento [Theatre](#) Company did it in April). It's a story partly based on [John Lomax](#)'s famed discovery of Huddie ([Lead Belly](#)) Ledbetter, and on the documentary "The Language You Cry In" (which traces a Mende language Georgia slave song to one still sung by women in [Sierra Leone](#)).

Lombardo's orchestration of the performances may make the writing seem more rickety than it is, particularly at first. Wortham's driven Susannah, an Ivy League musicologist searching for the African roots of slave songs on a WPA grant, plays her ambition, frustration, righteous anger and uptightness as if written in exclamation points. Little about the women's initial meeting rings true, in the writing or acting.

Once they get into the songs, though, all Higgins' big neon signs - about Susannah's quest or Pearl's missing daughter and the ancient family song she's determined not to reveal - get swallowed in a bigger drama.

Wortham begins to connect, with the audience as well as Pearl, when she pulls out her zither and, tentatively at first, explores the Irish roots of ballads from Susannah's Appalachian research. Jones segues with ease from a playfully sexy playground ditty into ever-more-powerful, soulful a cappella renditions of old field songs, early blues, spirituals, gutbucket blues and that African song.

As the songs take hold, and John Iacovelli's imposing prison set shifts to a wonderfully bohemian [Greenwich Village](#) flat, Lombardo makes Higgins' broader story come through. "Pearl" not only celebrates the African heritage it explores, but pays tribute to the white progressives of the '30s who fought for civil rights, while tweaking their own racial insensitivities.

The songs lend credence to the growing bond between the women, and fuel its emotional impact. By the time "Pearl" reached its climax in a heartrending duet Wednesday, there wasn't a dry eye - mine included - in the house.



Black Pearl Sings: Musical drama. By Frank Higgins. Directed by Rick Lombardo. Through Sept. 26. [San Jose Repertory Theatre](#), 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Two hours, 30 minutes. \$35-\$74. (408) 367-7255. [www.sjrep.com](#).

Jannie Jones can light up a small town on one song and break hearts with the next. That's a big advantage for a play about the [1930s](#) discovery of an [African American](#) roots singer in a Texas prison. It doesn't hurt that Jessica Wortham, as the white academic who finds her, has a strong, clear voice as well.

Frank Higgins' "Black Pearl [Sings](#)," which opened San Jose Repertory's 30th season Wednesday, wobbles at first, but makes you sit up and pay

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