

## 'Black Pearl' sings the blues with gusto

By: Georgia Rowe  
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"Black Pearl Sings" tells the story of a key era in American musical history.

Frank Higgins' play, now making its West Coast premiere in a poignant production at San Jose Repertory Theatre, is set in the 1930s at the moment when blues singers moved from the rural South to the concert halls of the North.

The two-character play begins when Susannah Mullally (Jessica Wortham), a well-educated New York ethnomusicologist, arrives at a Texas prison farm looking for songs predating slavery.

There she meets Alberta "Pearl" Johnson (Jannie Jones), an African-American woman serving time for murder.

At first, Pearl can't believe that this white woman could be interested in the field songs and spirituals she's been singing since she was a girl.

But it quickly becomes apparent that Susannah is serious. And she doesn't simply want to archive the songs. She wants to take Pearl back to New York and put her onstage.

Pearl is a fictional character, but her story is loosely based on the true story of Huddie Ledbetter, also known as Lead Belly, a singer who became one of the first black artists to bring Southern "roots" music to white audiences.

Susannah, meanwhile, is drawn from researchers such as John Lomax, who combed the South collecting, recording and preserving folk, blues and other early American music.

Directed by the Rep's artistic director, Rick Lombardo, as the first offering of the company's 30th anniversary season, the show features outstanding performances by the two actors.

Jones is especially strong as the singer who, fearful of the implications in her early scenes, learns to trust her songs to Susannah. Wortham is beguiling as the prim, single-minded scholar who finds herself humanized by the experience.

Lombardo and his design team — John Iacovelli (sets), Frances Nelson McSherry (costumes) and Daniel Meeker (lighting) — evoke the 1930s in telling detail, from the oppressive atmosphere of the early Texas prison scenes to Susannah's artsy Greenwich Village flat.

Most important, though, is the music, beautifully sculpted in Lombardo's sound designs. The story of "Black Pearl Sings" may harken back to an earlier era, but its songs are for all time.



### **Black Pearl Sings**

**Where:** San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays, 3 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; closes Sept. 26

**Tickets:** \$35 to \$74

**Contact:** (408) 367-7255, [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com)

Read more at the San Francisco Examiner: <http://www.sfexaminer.com/lifestyle/Black-Pearl-sings-the-blues-with-gusto-102932344.html#ixzz0zo2qlig7>