

Review: 'Black Pearl Sings!' at the San Jose Rep

By [Charlie McCollum](#)

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Susannah Mullally is an ambitious, tightly wound researcher for the Library of Congress, trying to make her mark in the male-dominated academia of the 1930s by discovering a pre-slavery song.

Alberta Johnson, known as Pearl, is doing time in a Texas prison for maiming an abusive man. But she has that song and is, as Susannah puts it at one point, an "authentic doorway" to the roots of African-American music.

Their relationship -- most often a contentious test of wills -- is the heart of Frank Higgins' "Black Pearl Sings!" The opening production of the San Jose Rep's 30th season runs through Sept. 26. While Higgins' piece, a relatively new one, still has the feel of a work in progress, director Rick Lombardo, the Rep's artistic director, and his cast bring such power and passion to the show that you can almost overlook the shortcomings of the play itself.



Actors Jessica Wortham, left, as "Susannah" and Jannie Jones as "Pearl" during rehearsal for the musical "Black Pearl Sings" at San Jose Rep in San Jose Saturday Aug. 28, 2010. San Jose's premier theater company is celebrating its 30th anniversary season. (Photo by Patrick Tehan/Mercury News)

Higgins draws much of the inspiration for "Black Pearl" from the real life story of music folklorist John Lomax, who collected traditional music for the Library of Congress during the Depression, and his greatest discovery: Huddie Ledbetter, who called himself Lead Belly.

Lomax met Ledbetter in a Louisiana prison and discovered he was an incredible resource for songs that were on the verge of being forgotten. Lomax got Ledbetter pardoned and took him across the country to perform. But the two men eventually clashed, with Ledbetter finally pulling a knife on Lomax. While both would go on to considerable fame, the violence ended their relationship.

The rich story of Lomax and Ledbetter raises all manner of dramatic possibilities with its questions about freedom, race, the clash of cultures and who "owns" traditional music. And Higgins tries to bring that drama to "Black Pearl," while shifting the protagonists' gender to add another layer (sexism) to his tale.

The major, if not fatal, flaw in "Black Pearl" is an imbalance between the two characters. On the page, Pearl is far and away the more fully realized character. She has a more developed and more tragic back story. She gets most of the good lines and certainly the most emotional moments. And she gets to sing achingly beautiful songs of the old South, spirituals and folk tunes that echo the pain of slavery and spiritual joys of elusive freedom.

In contrast, the trials of Susannah -- born into society, college-educated -- seem like small potatoes. As written, she comes off as a brittle woman who doesn't have the strength to go head-to-head with the formidable Pearl. When she offers Pearl a cigarette for one of her songs, Pearl glares and shoots back, "You don't get my soul for a cigarette."

It is a very uneven fight and one that throws the play out of balance. That is particularly true in the second act where, until its emotionally charged final scene, Susannah essentially fades into the background.

But at the Rep, "Black Pearl" is so vibrant that the inherent flaws of Higgins' play are largely, if not completely, masked by the virtues of the production.

Jannie Jones, as Pearl, and Jessica Wortham, as Susannah, bring so much power to their roles, and their on-stage connection is so strong, that they lift "Black Pearl" to dramatic heights only suggested by Higgins' words and story structure.

Jones -- who has performed one-woman shows incorporating the music of Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters -- is a powerhouse singer, raising the roof and stirring the soul with her a cappella versions of those old spirituals. She embodies all the pain and suffering that has been Pearl's life while still showing a sure touch with the comedic moments.

Wortham is given the tougher task, taking on an underwritten and underdeveloped part. But she manages to make Susannah relatable and sympathetic, delivering lines that are barely serviceable with conviction and humor and refusing to allow Susannah to fade away in the second act. And when she is called upon to sing some of the songs Susannah collected before she met Pearl (largely folk tunes from Appalachia), Wortham more than holds her own in the vocal department.

Lombardo's direction is nimble in its execution. and his pacing is so sharp that it covers up more than a few holes in the script. The integration of set design (by John Iacovelli), Daniel Meeker's lighting, and the sound (by Lombardo himself) is spot-on.

In the end, this "Black Pearl Sings!" is an entertaining, sometimes emotional, sometimes funny evening of theater -- and very much a triumph of acting, direction and production over material.

'Black Pearl Sings!'

By Frank Higgins

When: Through Sept. 26

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

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes (with one intermission)

Tickets: \$35-\$79, 408-367-7255, www.sjrep.com