



## “Black Pearl Sings” from her soul and straight into our hearts

By [Cynthia Corral](#)

September 13th, 2010 @ 9:48 PM



(l to r) Jessica Wortham and Jannie Jones

We attended *Black Pearl Sings!* at the **San Jose Repertory Theatre** on Sept 9. It has taken me a bit longer than usual to get this review up because I honestly am not sure what my opinion of this play is. Did I like it? Yes. Acting and singing? A+. Story? I think this is what bothers me. But let's take it piece by piece:

There are only two characters in the play. First we meet Susannah, an ethnomusicologist for the Library of Congress who appears to have led a typical, privileged, white life, with the usual setbacks from being a woman. But immediately we are introduced to “Pearl” Johnson through her beautiful, soulful voice as she sings on the chain gang. Susannah is at the women's prison to collect authentic, pre-slavery, African-American music, and she realizes she may have struck gold with Pearl. Act I

shows Susannah convincing Pearl to share as many songs as possible (through manipulation, bribery and pleading), learning Pearl's difficult and painful history, and deciding the price for each of these pieces of Pearl's soul.

Act II jumps just a bit into the future, after Pearl has earned parole, and the question of price per musical bit of soul continues along with the resolution of Pearl's main issue: her missing daughter.

I was surprised in the beginning to learn that researchers had actually spent (are spending?) time collecting old folk music, and that this could have gotten Susannah a professorship at Harvard. But throughout the show we hear Pearl beautifully belting out song after song, and often we hear Susannah singing other folk songs as well. Jannie Jones and Jessica Wortham, as Pearl and Susannah, are amazing, talented singers and actresses. It soon becomes quite clear, as we listen to Pearl pour her body and soul into each and every lyric, that collecting this music is an extremely important part of our history, no matter if we are black or white.



(l to r) Jannie Jones and Jessica Wortham

At intermission I questioned my guest on her experience and she was quite enjoying herself. The characters were engaging, the singing was great, and we wanted to know what was going to happen in Act II. But I was also feeling just a little bit empty, not quite sure what this show was supposed to mean.

In Act II we are finally faced with some major issues and problems in the characters' lives, and the play is wrapped up beautifully and emotionally with the help of the two very impressive actresses. We see how the friendship between the

unlikely two has grown, and we see huge growth in Pearl's character. Jannie Jones gives a heart wrenching performance and I don't know how she manages to get through those kinds of emotions every night. They both received an immediate and deserving standing ovation from the audience.

I had enjoyed myself, I enjoyed the singing immensely, and I thought it was a great story, but I was still left feeling empty. There are some unresolved details, such as the story behind Pearl's scars, and exactly what had happened that brought Pearl to the chain gang. We see as early as Act I that Susannah's life might not have been as privileged as we first thought, and that she faced much discrimination because she was a woman. But her back story details are also never

fleshed out completely, and she certainly does not compare to what Pearl had experienced. Yes, throughout the play there are issues regarding the price that is asked for and sometimes paid in the name of research, knowledge, the quest for power and advancement, and even plain old survival. But I'm not sure this play delved quite enough into these questions to create a solid drama.

And yet, when you sit and watch Pearl sing her final song, none of the rest matters. We feel her pain, and without knowing the entirety of her painful past and lacking the understanding of what she is singing... we do understand. We understand what she went through, what has been asked from her, and what she has given.

**Should you see this production? Yes.** Singing and acting are extraordinary, the two main sets are incredible in their beauty and attention to detail (somehow without going overboard in Act II, and when you see that set, you'll know what I mean), and the story IS an important one even if not written with the perfection I've become accustomed to from the Rep. I DO recommend this play and would love to see more guests from a variety of cultural backgrounds, who might really understand and value the message given.

**[Black Pearl Sings!](#)**

**September 2 – September 26, 2010**

Tickets \$35 to \$74

**San Jose Rep Box Office**

101 Paseo de San Antonio

<http://SJRep.com>

408.367.7255