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BWW Review: BLACK PEARL SINGS

by E.H. Reiter Dec. 4, 2017



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BLACK PEARL SINGS at the San Diego Repertory Theatre, is a story of Pearl and Susannah, two women who are opposites in every way that find a path to their goals through history and music. This production is a beautiful play that is enhanced by the songs that are woven through it.

Susannah Mullally, played by [Allison Spratt](#) Pearce works for the Library of Congress collecting songs that are previously unknown to the general public.. After a male colleague steals her last discovery and leverages it into a cushy professorship at Harvard, Susannah is looking for undiscovered songs in prisons. There she meets Alberta "Pearl" Johnson, played by [Minka Wiltz](#), a woman convicted of killing an ex-boyfriend, but who has songs that may interest this song collector. Susannah has a plan to get Pearl paroled so she can find her lost daughter, as well as helping Susannah achieve her career goals.

Wiltz, is smart, and has a mischievous sense of humor as Pearl. Pearl's love for her family and her heritage are tangible as she shares her songs including spiritual, blues, and African based songs with Susannah. Her pain and distress at trying to find her missing daughter and her wariness at being exploited in this project comes across powerfully as she tries to protect herself and those she loves from further pain. Her Pearl is a survivor, a performer, and someone who knows her worth no matter what circumstance she is in at the moment. Wiltz's stage presence and singing voice are expressive and powerful, and she is just as engaging when singing as she is when she is speaking.

Pearce's Susannah is driven and focused, and her love for the history these songs bring with them shines through. Her moneyed upbringing is shown in her well-mannered reactions, and her ambitions. Her Susannah is empathetic and determined which makes her believable when she says things like, "When a person dies a library is lost,"

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you can feel that she is truly sad at that lost knowledge. Pearce is also a talented singer with a lovely voice and is a worthy match to Wiltz's Pearl.

The slow build to a friendship between these women is believable, but as are the obstacles that the women encounter. The power dynamic between them goes back and forth, Pearl has a song Susannah wants, Susannah can get info Pearl doesn't have, and it continues after they leave the prison. Most notably as Pearl flexes her muscles as the star in their first concert, where Pearl asks for audience participation much to Susannah's alarm.

While both women know they are facing obstacles, the play takes care to acknowledge while they may share many similarities. They are not equals in how the world interacts with them; one is obstructed by racism and one by sexism.

Directed by Thomas W. Jones II, this play keeps a lyrical feeling between the dialogue and the songs, which helps this show flow between them easily. Even as it touches upon racism, intolerance, sexism, in these women's stories this show still feels hopeful and does not feel heavy or weighed down by them.

Sound design by Matt Lescault-Wood helps drive home the story and atmosphere as it works in sync as the story plays out onstage. The projections by **Victoria Petrovich**, combined with the lighting by Sherrice Mojgani work together effectively establish a sense of time and place. All of this plays out on a versatile set by Sean Fanning.

Sadly, for a show set in the 1930's there are still so many parallels to present day that it makes this play less a comment on history and more a applicable than any of us should want to admit. Luckily, **Minka Wiltz** and Alison Spratt Pearce are both up to the challenge of telling the stories of these two dynamic women.

BLACK PEARL SINGS! is playing at the San Diego Repertory Theatre through December 17th. For ticket and show time information go to www.sdrep.org

Photo Credit: **Allison Spratt** Pearce (left) and **Minka Wiltz** in San Diego Rep's "Black Pearl Sings!" (Daren Scott)

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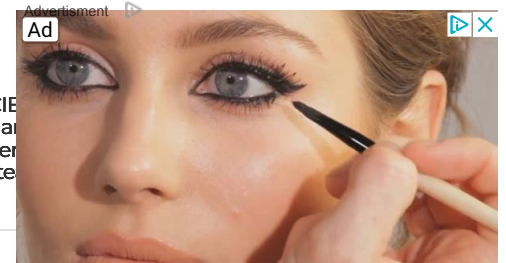
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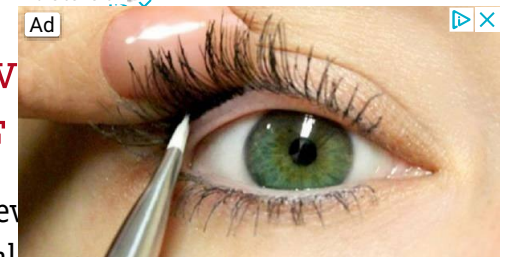
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