

Review | San Diego Rep's 'Black Pearl' a rich ode to the power of music



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"Pearl Sings!" (Daren Scott)



By **James Hebert**

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It may not be a true musical, but “Black Pearl Sings!” is full of song. In a way, it also is one.

The San Diego Rep staging of Frank Higgins’ absorbing play crackles with a sense of rhythm — not just in the vintage spirituals and blues tunes that course through the show, but in its smartly crafted dialogue and the syncopated interplay between its two excellent actors.

That overarching musical feel takes hold from the first scene, when Alberta “Pearl” Johnson (Minka Wiltz) shuffles into view, singing a gritty blues tune that’s punctuated by foot-stomps and the clanking of a ball and chain.

It continues in the prickly exchanges between Pearl, who’s serving time in a Texas prison for murder, and Susannah Mullally (Allison Spratt Pearce), a “song collector” (quite a job title — do you need a net for that?) who’s trying to track down and record the ancestral music of African-Americans.

“I don’t need another white woman in a girdle tellin’ me about God,” Pearl snaps in the pair’s initial meeting, believing the prim Susannah is at the prison to proselytize.

To which Susannah protests, “I’m trying to keep the songs of your people from dying out!” before insisting: “Give me something about pain. You must know something about pain.”

That, Pearl does. She has spent 10 years locked up for a gruesome-sounding act meant to protect her daughter, whom she is now desperately hoping to locate.

When the magnificent Wiltz sings the slavery-era song “Trouble So Hard,” her expressive voice — with its deep, soulful vibrato — captures an agony that not only reflects Pearl’s lived experience, but taps into a kind of birthright of misery and fortitude.

What’s maybe most remarkable about “Black Pearl Sings!,” directed by Rep returnee Thomas W. Jones II with a sure sense of flow (and welcome同情感), is how well the two women find common ground between Pearl and Susannah.

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Playwright Higgins based the story loosely on the real-life relationship between the musicologist John Lomax and the blues icon Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter, who likewise first met when the singer was in prison and the scholar was searching for songs.

The gender switch of the play, set in the early ’30s, introduces the barriers inevitably encountered (then and now) by a capable and ambitious woman like Susannah as she tries to breach the walls of a male-dominated field.

Pearce, an accomplished singer in her own right, conveys beautifully both Susannah’s passion for her pursuit and the way her zest to prove herself sometimes get the best of her.

But the play doesn’t try to suggest Susannah’s suffering is on a par with Pearl’s, and the warts-and-all way it portrays the characters helps keep the piece from falling into the trap of one of those awful “white savior” stories.

The second half of the two-hour, one-intermission show has the pair heading to New York after Pearl’s parole, for public appearances that they hope might help in the push to find her daughter. (Why Pearl agrees to all this does remain a small puzzle.)

Victoria Petrovich’s projections convey a rich sense of mood and place, and work in harmony with Sherrice Mojgani’s lighting and Mary Larson’s costumes as well as Matt Lescault-Wood’s atmospheric sound.

As she explores her newfound freedom, Pearl visits the famed Cotton Club and meets a young Cab Calloway; at one point she also demonstrates a dance sequence with help from an unsuspecting audience member (yes folks, I made my Rep debut).

But there’s one age-old song Pearl saves for herself, and as the moving pillars on Sean Fanning’s inventively shifting set open up into mirrored panels, Wiltz’s affecting performance of the piece seems to echo down through generations.

And maybe up into the firmament.

As Pearl says earlier in the show: “If there ain’t singin’ in heaven, I don’t want to be there.”

‘Black Pearl Sings!’

d 8 p.m. Sundays; 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays. (Some exceptions; check with theater.)

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Tickets: \$25 and up

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