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Black Pearl Sings!

San Diego Repertory Theatre

Review by David Dixon | [Season Schedule](#)

1933 might be less than a century ago, but the world has changed significantly since then. That being said, there are still too many instances of intolerance, sexism and racism in the 2017. Loosely inspired by the life of Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter, Frank Higgins' script of *Black Pearl Sings!* features two people affected by inequality. The main characters are strong women who, instead of indulging in self-pity, want to thrive and succeed as much as they possibly can. San Diego Repertory Theatre's production at the Lyceum Theatre features their stories in addition to beautifully staged sung-through sequences.

At "a women's prison farm in southeast Texas," a collector of songs for the Library of Congress, Susannah Mullally (Allison Spratt Pearce), visits a talented prisoner, Alberta "Pearl" Johnson (Minka Wiltz). Pearl was arrested for murdering her abusive alcoholic ex-boyfriend. The song collector hopes that she can record Pearl singing rare melodies from a variety of related genres including African, spiritual, and the blues that she learned from



her ancestors. Eventually, they both start to find out personal details about each other. Susannah soon comes up with a plan to get Pearl paroled.

Allison Spratt Pearce and Minka Wiltz

Photo by Daren Scott

o women Higgins has created are developed with a lot of care, and are shown to have realistic flaws. His characters are unjustifiably judged because they are women. What's worse for Pearl is that the color of her skin automatically makes other people treat her with disrespect. Despite their likable personalities, neither of the women are saints. At times, Susannah makes decisions that are selfish, and Pearl never regrets the vicious crime that she committed. Even at their most tense, Higgins slowly builds a bond between them that is the emotional center of *Black Pearl Sings!*.

Wiltz and Pearce bring lively personalities to their roles. They emphasize the extreme differences, as well as similarities, that exist between the protagonists. Pearl often speaks with bluntness and mischievous humor. On the other hand, Pearce plays Susannah as a well-mannered speaker who wants to leave an impact on others. If some of the lines that Pearce says might seem a little too on the nose, they still fit Susannah's eager nature. In addition to their acting, the two are just as engaging to watch when they sing tunes such as "Trouble So Hard," "Kumbaya," and "Little Sally Walker." They display true vocal versatility with the different types of music.

Director Thomas W. Jones II and his crew move easily between dialogue and music in ways that are thrilling to experience. Conversations are staged in a straightforward manner that doesn't feel overtly theatrical. However, Jones blocks the songs with an almost dreamlike visual style. Matt Lescault-Wood's audio, Sherrice Mojgani's lighting, and Victoria Petrovich's projections feature artistic touches that enhance and augment the lyrics and score being performed onstage. Lescault-Wood's sound design, in particular, stands out in its use of recordings that are in sync with the action occurring at the Lyceum space. Parts of Sean Fanning's set move in an almost magical way when the two main characters vocalize in solo numbers and duets.

Despite the progress that has been made since the 1930s, a lot of small moments and lines of dialogue still resonate, and these disturbing parallels keep Higgins' plot from feeling like an old-fashioned period piece. Given the near endless recent news about allegations of disturbing acts of racism and sexual misconduct, it's not amazing how much of the play connects with today's audience. Hope exists throughout *Black Pearls Sings!* and it doesn't feel tacked on or sappy. The story is about individuals who experience growth that's genuine and realistic.

From beginning to end, Higgins and Jones II find the right balance between a creative tribute to unforgettable music and a fascinating original story about overcoming prejudice. Their work, along with the haunting performances of the cast, results in a deeply affecting evening of theatre.

San Diego Repertory Theatre presents *Black Pearl Sings!* through December 17, 2017, Sundays through Saturdays at 79 Horton Plaza, San Diego CA. Tickets start at \$25.00 and can be purchased online at www.sdrep.org or by phone at 1-619-544-1000.



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