


Review: Raleigh's Theatre in the Park stages 'Black Pearl Sings!' with powerful musical performances

Theater critic Roy Dicks says the singing makes up for production drawbacks in this Theater in the Park production.





Rozlyn Sorrell, left, and Lynda Clark star in Theatre in the Park's production of "Black Pearl Sings!" CURTIS BROWN PHOTOGRAPHY

By Roy C. Dicks - Correspondent

An important achievement during the Great Depression was the preservation of American roots music. Library of Congress representatives made recordings all over the U.S., especially in rural and economically depressed areas.

Frank Higgins' "Black Pearl Sings!" is a fictional look at one woman's determined quest to document Gullah and West African songs. Theatre in the Park's staging of this 2007 two-character piece offers some powerful musical performances and a moving story, helping to mitigate several script and production drawbacks.

It begins in 1933 in a Texas prison warden's office. Susannah, hoping to discover new songs among the inmates, asks to see a female prisoner she's overheard singing soulfully outside. Pearl is wary of what a white woman wants from her, and Pearl's only focus is finding her long-lost daughter. Prim Susannah and earthy Pearl come to terms eventually. Susannah arranges for Pearl's parole and promises to help track down the daughter; Pearl allows Susannah to record songs that Pearl learned from older relatives.

Later, in a Greenwich Village apartment, Susannah rehearses Pearl for a high society performance, hoping for donations to the recording project. But Pearl begins to feel used and a clash of wills and goals ensue.

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As Pearl, Rozlyn Sorrell's well-established vocal talents are on full display, communicating captivating verve and gripping pain. She gives Pearl humorous feistiness but also touching heart, breathing life into the playwright's uneven characterization. Lynda Clark believably projects Susannah's genuine appreciation of the music and her ambition to triumph in a man's world. But her characterization seems inconsistent - cold and distant one minute, relaxed and warm the next, with physical comedy sprinkled in between.

At Saturday's performance, pacing was leaden, with halting dialogue delivered in too relaxed a manner, often nearly inaudible. Sorrell and Clark have performed the play elsewhere, but here Clark is also the director, a difficult task when onstage for most of the play.

Although designer Mike Raab's prison office is suitable dingy and the apartment impressively detailed, the former is oddly crammed to one side and the latter fills the playing area with a scale and richness seemingly inappropriate for bohemian quarters.

Still, the plot's resolution is heartwarming, making the evening's liabilities fade in an emotionally satisfying end.

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