

## Ladies and blues, Temple Theatre's Black Pearl Sings

By Byron Woods



Photo by Peggy Taphorn

Rozlyn Sorrell in "Black Pearl Sings"

**W**e can't see the singer at the start of *Black Pearl Sings*, but her voice floats through the air of a Texas women's penitentiary. "Down on me, down on me," she all but groans in a low alto, "Seems like everybody in the whole wide world is down on me."

Decades before Janis Joplin sang it, a woman named Vera Hall did. We know this because musicologist John Lomax recorded her in Livingston, Ala., in 1939, during one of his now-famous tours collecting folk songs for the Library of Congress.

But as playwright Frank Higgins points out in his potent 2007 two-hander, such a project was harder for the women (including novelist Zora Neale Hurston) who also traveled the South in the same cause.

In *Black Pearl Sings*, a white musicologist, Susannah Mullally (Lynda Clark), meets prisoner Alberta "Pearl" Johnson (Rozlyn Sorrell) in 1933. Johnson marvels that Mullally is "a woman who drives her own car!" We then learn that Mullally's research trips resulted from being viewed as a professional threat by the men above her: "Siberia, in D.C., is Texas," she ruefully says. Mullally is no starry-eyed idealist. But when Mullally says she wants to

marvels that Mullally is "a woman who drives her own car!" We then learn that Mullally's research trips resulted from being viewed as a professional threat by the men above her: "Siberia, in D.C., is Texas," she ruefully says. Mullally is no starry-eyed idealist. But when Mullally says she wants to "prove that songs were stronger than slavery chains," Johnson brings her up short: "Have you ever *been* in chains?"

Under Kathie deNobriga's direction, Clark and Sorrell capture the cultural chasm between the women as they start to form some tentative bonds. Doing so involves sharing food, drinking from the same water glass and trading songs.

But the songs Mullally wants from Johnson must be negotiated for something other than currency. "You can offer me 30 pieces of silver and I won't," she flatly states. Instead, she wants Mullally to help her find her daughter, who's disappeared while Johnson's been incarcerated.

Though Higgins' script sometimes stoops to dramatic contrivances, it does look into the biases of the period's philanthropy, as when the musicologist suggests Johnson perform in a prisoner's uniform "for authenticity's sake." Johnson rebels, asking, "Why not blackface?"

You could call this show a star vehicle for Sorrell, whose rich, unaccompanied voice deserves a full house on its own. But mainly, *Black Pearl Sings* is a vehicle for the music, a human gallery of songs of warning, lamentation, desire and praise: stations we all come to, sooner or later.

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