

Review: American Conservatory Theatre makes beautiful music with 'Souvenir'

By Pat Craig
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 02/19/2009 10:56:22 AM PST

It's hard to imagine getting so much enjoyment from the singing of a tone-deaf woman until you see Tony Award-winner Judy Kaye play the legendary Florence Foster Jenkins, the little diva who believed she could sing, even though the rest of the world knew she couldn't.

Kaye stars in the American Conservatory Theatre Company production of "Souvenir: A Fantasia on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins," beautifully directed by Vivian Matalon, which opened Wednesday at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

"Souvenir" is a tale spun from the memory of Cosme McMoon (Donald Corren), who at show's start is playing piano at a lounge in 1964, two decades after the diva's death and two decades and a few weeks after Jenkins' remarkable sold-out recital at Carnegie Hall. The conceit here is that we are seeing Jenkins through McMoon's eyes, so the story doesn't necessarily have to be the absolute truth.

The truth, though, is nobody knows the truth about Jenkins, daughter of wealth from a Pennsylvania family, who married a doctor to find her artistic self, but didn't come into her own until she was divorced and well into middle-age. She glided into New York on inherited money at 40 and established herself as a socialite and a diva. She held the fantasy that she

was a great soprano, probably until her dying day.

"Souvenir" flashes back to Jenkins in 1932, when McMoon comes to work as her recital accompanist and begins sharing Jenkins' remarkable career. In so doing, he becomes a partially willing co-conspirator in her grand delusion.

But it quickly becomes evident there is much more to this woman, who is the secret laughing stock of New York society. And perhaps that's why McMoon, an aspiring young musician, remained with her for a dozen years.

And that part of the story, perhaps even more than Jenkins' hilarious singing and outrageous costumes, is what makes the play such a heartwarming and human story — face it, you're not going to get two hours out of a one-joke show.

Kaye and Corren present a sympathetic view of Jenkins as a generous and kind human being, one who suggests early on that notes, as the composer wrote them, are only guideposts, mere suggestions of what the singer might be expected to do with a particular tune.

The musician in McMoon finds the attitude near heresy but eventually comes to believe that Jenkins may have a point. Both performers in "Souvenir" are at the top of their game. Corren, an excellent pianist, brings a rare sense of sly comic timing to his role, playing his lines and the pauses within them much like a latter day Jack Benny. He lets the spaces, as well as wonderful facial expressions do wonders with the role.

Kaye, in what has to be a role that would tempt any performer to come in over the top, shows a remarkable restraint in not just playing Jenkins for laughs. As she plays it the singer is not only absolutely convinced she is a world-class diva, but

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manages to convince the audience she truly believes this.

And, Kaye plays the role with a voice that toweringly off-key, off-pitch, off-everything; no easy task for a singer as skilled as she. Just how awful Kaye-as-Jenkins sings will come as a particular surprise to those who remember her previous role at ACT — as Mrs. Lovett in Sondheim's "Sweeney Todd."

Reach Pat Craig at pcraig@bayareanewsgroup.com

Theater review WHAT: American Conservatory Theatre Company presents "Souvenir: A Fantasia on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins," by Stephen Temperley
WHEN: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays, through March 15. Additional matinee 2 p.m. Feb. 24.
WHERE: American Conservatory Theatre, 415 Geary St., San Francisco **RUNNING TIME: 2 hours 20 minutes** **TICKETS: \$17-\$82, 415-749-2228 or www.act-sf.org**

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