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A musical ‘Souvenir’ not to be forgotten

By Leslie Katz

Examiner Staff Writer 2/26/09



Perfect pitch: Donald Corren and Judy Kaye are excellent in “Souvenir.” A Fantasia on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins” at The American Conservatory Theater. Courtesy photo **SAN FRANCISCO** – For a show about a woman who is tone-deaf, “Souvenir” ironically boasts spot-on tone.

Overflowing with heart, soul and laughs, the comedy starring Judy Kaye in a Tony-nominated role is a must-see production onstage through March 15 at The American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

Playwright Stephen Temperley based his story, that he calls a “fantasia,” on the real life of Florence Foster Jenkins, a New York woman of means who was convinced she had perfect pitch.

In her enthusiasm for serious music, she enlisted a struggling young composer-pianist to assist her in preparing a recital of arias and other songs for a select audience at the Ritz-Carlton hotel. In need of money, the musician, Cosme McMoon, accepts the gig, even though Florence’s singing resembles the vocalization of a cat in pain.

Florence’s concert turns out to be a hit, and so begins a 12-year association (from 1932 to 1944) between the deluded diva and her faithful accompanist, culminating in a Carnegie Hall performance.

On one level, “Souvenir” serves up one terrific joke, with numerous delightful variations. Every time Florence shrieks, bellows or warbles notes off-key, she follows with an utterly sincere comment to Cosme about the magic of good music.

On another level, the show addresses universal themes, of trust, loyalty, self-awareness, friendship and love, for “Souvenir” is Cosme’s story as much as it is Florence’s. Told from Cosme’s viewpoint, it’s a powerful tale of a passionate, if not sexual, connection between two people dealing with their admiration for art and each other.

The success of “Souvenir” stems from Kaye’s perfectly nuanced performance. She sells the character from the outset, radiating Florence’s charm, warmth and happiness, even as she unknowingly destroys some of history’s most beloved melodies.

Donald Corren’s Cosme is equally appealing. While Corren and Kaye’s complementary comic timing really is what fuels the show, Corren provides actual good music: Cosme’s got a great touch at the piano and sings “jazz” well, even coaxing Florence to open up to popular music.

Although opera lovers will be amused by the abundant references to famous music, novices have plenty to enjoy, too, particularly Tracy Christensen’s to-die-for costumes. Florence’s wardrobe is a visual treat, from her everyday elegant suits and dresses to the crazy outfits she dons that wonderfully enhance her wacky performances.

THEATER REVIEW

Souvenir

Where: American Conservatory Theater, 405 Geary St., San Francisco


When: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays; closes March 15

Tickets: \$17 to \$82

Contact: (415) 749-2228; www.act-sf.org

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