

Theater review: 'Souvenir' strikes a chord

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**Souvenir: A Fantasia on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins:** Starring

Judy Kaye and Donald Corren. By Stephen Temperley, directed by Vivian Matalon.

(Through March 15 at American Conservatory Theater, 405 Geary St. San Francisco. \$14-\$57. (415) 749-2228. www.act-sf.org.)

"Souvenir: A Fantasia on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins," which opened Wednesday night at the American Conservatory Theatre, is such a laugh riot, it may take you a few minutes to get that there's a rather plaintive message beneath it all. In the end, it's that undercurrent of melancholy that lifts Stephen Temperley's play far above being merely a spoof on a real-life socialite who wanted to sing in the worst way. And, boy, did she ever.

The real Florence Foster Jenkins was discouraged from singing, first as a child by her father, and later as an adult by her husband. Once she was on her own, with an inheritance from her family, Jenkins was finally free to let her voice fly forth. When critics howled at her singing, she is said to have responded, "People may say I can't sing, but no one can ever say I didn't sing."

Temperley's play is as much about Jenkins' long-suffering but loyal accompanist, Cosme McMoon, as it is about the lady herself. The play opens in 1964, 20 years after Jenkins' death, and McMoon is working the ivories at a New York piano bar. Soon enough, we're transported back to 1932, when he agrees to work with the tone-deaf Jenkins for one recital, just to pay the rent. He stays with her for 12 years. He has tried to suggest that "some of the notes are not quite ... secure," but Jenkins hears only what she wants to hear, in more ways than one.

Have I mentioned that at the enormous heart of this whole enterprise is a bravura performance by Tony winner Judy Kaye? At first, you'll react to the comedic brilliance as Kaye yips like a Chihuahua, hoots like an owl, honks like barnyard fowl and never once comes anywhere near the vicinity of pitch. She delivers her lines with perfect timing and, with only an almost imperceptible ripple on her face, she is at one moment silly and delusional, then vulnerable and briefly aware of her own shortcomings the next.

Donald Corren is almost as good as Cosme, but he's been allowed to punch his punch lines a bit too hard in places. Cosme's character, in particular, is saddled with a number of one-liners and set-up jokes. And they're pretty funny on their own. Trouble is, you can feel Corren telegraphing them in advance.

R. Michael Miller has created a pleasantly utilitarian set, Tracy Christensen's costumes are a hoot (although, did women wear seamless stockings in the '40s?) and Vivian Matalon's direction is effective, although a bit rollicking here and there.

If you're a fan of British sitcoms, Kaye's Jenkins may remind you at first of Patricia Routledge's Hyacinth Bucket ("It's 'Bouquet' ") in "Keeping Up Appearances." Hyacinth can't sing either, but is convinced the world is just dying to hear her dulcet voice. The big difference between these two warbling wannabes is that Hyacinth is a figure of ridicule, but, in the end, Jenkins is not. As we laugh at her horrible sounds and her utter lack of self-awareness, something else is setting in. It begins as sympathy and ends as empathy, understanding and even admiration. That's the real strength of Temperley's play, but it's Kaye's performance that adds even more color, depth and three-dimensional character to the part. I don't know about the real Florence Foster Jenkins, but Judy Kaye is extravagantly gifted.

At the end of her life, Jenkins made it to Carnegie Hall. No matter what the world hears when she sings, Jenkins hears a beautiful sound in her head. Especially as personified by Kaye, who is to say that's a bad thing?

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