FST PRESENTS BLACK PEARL SINGS!, AN UPLIFTING DRAMA ABOUT HOPE, HEALING, AND THE POWER OF SONG

(Sarasota, FL) — Florida Studio Theatre (FST) is proud to present Black Pearl Sings!, an uplifting, historical drama about an unlikely bond, the preservation of musical heritage, and the human need for hope and healing. When two women from very different backgrounds are brought together by the power of music, each discovers that the other woman holds the key to everything they’ve been searching for. Called “Remarkable” and “Compelling” by The Chicago Tribune, Black Pearl Sings! by Frank Higgins begins playing June 28 in FST’s Keating Theatre.

Black Pearl Sings! is part of a three-show subscription package. Also included in the Summer Mainstage subscription package is the comedic murder mystery Shear Madness, and the uproarious comedy, Ken Ludwig’s A Comedy of Tenors. Subscriptions for all three Summer Mainstage shows can be purchased for as little as $49, and single tickets for Black Pearl Sings! range from $25-39. Subscriptions and single tickets are on sale at FloridaStudioTheatre.org or at 941.366.9000.

Set in 1935 Depression-era Texas, Black Pearl Sings! tells the story of Susannah Mullally and Alberta “Pearl” Johnson. Susannah is an ambitious Library of Congress musicologist, determined to record undocumented slave songs, preserving them for generations to come. Pearl is an African American woman with a soulful voice, a steely spirit, and a sentence in a female prison. Pearl’s memory is a treasure-trove of unrecorded slave era songs – the answer to Susannah’s long search for undiscovered African American music. Susannah’s idea to share Pearl’s music with the world could mean the prisoner’s freedom – the answer to Pearl’s dream of being able to search for her missing daughter. But can Pearl hand over her ancestors’ songs without giving up something of herself?

“Black Pearl Sings! is incandescent,” said show director Kate Alexander, who was also at the helm of FST’s 2009 production of the stirring play. “When I re-read the script, I was moved, laughed out loud, and even got goosebumps. When that happens, it tells me that there are truths in the play that will move you to your core.”

“What stands out to me most about Black Pearl Sings! is the absolute strength of character in Pearl,” said FST’s Producing Artistic Director Richard Hopkins. “She is a woman who has known tragedy and heartache, and yet, she somehow maintains a strength of character that leads her to do the best for those she loves.”

Inspired by the real-life partnership of musicologist John Lomax and legendary folk/singer-songwriter Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter, this inspiring story is anchored by 20 traditional spirituals and folk songs, performed acappella throughout the play.

“All of the songs in Black Pearl Sings! are actual songs that have been passed from one generation to the next via oral tradition,” said playwright Frank Higgins. “For example, the first song of the show is
‘Down On Me,’ which many may recognize as a hit song from the late ’60s sang by Janis Joplin. She learned of the song the same way that I did, from a recording of songs from the Georgia and South Carolina sea islands. We re-create the original version in the play, which is drastically different from what Joplin recorded in the ’60s.”

Taking on the role of the fiery Pearl is Alice M. Gatling, who also played the character in FST’s 2009 production of Black Pearl Sings! as well as the theatre’s developmental reading of the work presented as part of its 2008 Burdick Reading Series.

“I can’t wait to see how the character fits me now. It’s been 14 years!” said Gatling. “I have not performed since 2019, so I’m a little anxious about returning to the stage, but I’m grateful that my return is with Black Pearl Sings!”

Playing Susannah Mullally is Rachel Moulton, who has previously been seen in such FST productions as Maytag Virgin (2022), The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (2019), and Honor Killing (2018). Black Pearl Sings! marks Moulton’s ninth time working under the direction of Kate Alexander.

The production’s creative team includes Isabel A. Curley-Clay and Moriah Curley-Clay (Scenic Design), Nia Safarr Banks (Costume Design), Suzie Sajec (Costume Coordination), Ethan Vail (Lighting Design), and Louis Vetter Torres (Sound Design).

FST’s production of Black Pearl Sings! is sponsored in part by the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Arts and Culture and the Florida Council on Arts and Culture, and the National Endowment for the Arts. The production is also supported by the Gulf Coast Community Foundation, The Shubert Foundation, and Sarasota County Tourist Development Tax Revenues.

ABOUT FLORIDA STUDIO THEATRE
Florida Studio Theatre (FST) is Sarasota’s contemporary theatre. Founded in 1973, FST has grown to a village of five theatres located in the heart of downtown Sarasota. Each theatre is small in size and large in impact— providing intimate and engaging settings for high-quality, professional performances.

Today, FST has established itself as a major force in American Theatre. FST is the largest subscription theatre in the state of Florida and among the largest in the country, serving more than 200,000 live attendees each year across its diverse programs: Mainstage, Cabaret, Stage III, Children’s Theatre, The FST School, New Play Development, and FST Improv.

Even with its growth, Florida Studio Theatre remains firmly committed to making the arts accessible and affordable to as many people as possible. Under the leadership of Producing Artistic Director Richard Hopkins, FST develops theatre that speaks to our living, evolving, and dynamically changing world. Hip and historical, entertaining and challenging, we are where everyone is welcome to engage in the art of theatre.

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