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"Ain't Misbehavin'" is as good as theatre gets.

By LARRY BLUMSACK

The joint is jumpin' it's really jumpin' at the Huntington Theatre Company's season opener "Ain't Misbehavin'." After 50 plus years of my direct involvement in the theatre or reviewing plays this production at the Huntington ingeniously directed and choreographed by Marcia Milgrom Dodge is as good as theatre gets on any stage, anywhere.

Five extraordinarily talented actor/singer/dancers celebrate the music of Thomas "Fats" Waller and the Harlem renaissance of the 20's and 30's with joy, vitality and excitement. Fats Waller, a master of stride jazz piano, composed over 450 songs and as a pianist and singer recorded over 500 sides. Stride is both a technique and style of playing swing/ragtime/jazz where the left hand "strides" back and forth playing the beat while the right hand plays the melody. In this show, pianist/musical director Ronald Metcalf is one of the best masters of stride I have ever had the pleasure of watching and listening to. His onstage presence and interaction with the cast is integral to the show's success.



Fats Waller was equally comfortable in Tin Pan Alley or Harlem. I reviewed the original Broadway production of "Ain't Misbehavin'" in 1978 which focused on Tin Pan Alley and this production at the Huntington is heads above that. Marcia Milgrom Dodge sets the scene at a rent party in a Harlem nightclub. Folks down on their luck in Harlem would host a rent party in their apartment, hire musicians, provide food and booze for an admission fee that went to their rent. Fats Waller in his early twenties was one of those rent party musicians.

Waller's music is lively, sultry, bawdy, funny, romantic and unforgettable. The show contains thirty plus songs he wrote or made hits include the title song "Ain't Misbehavin'," and "It Ain't Nobody's Biz-ness If I Do," "Honeysuckle Rose," "The Joint is Jumpin'." "Your Feet's Too Big," "Black and Blue," and "Squeeze Me" to name a few.

The entire production is an ensemble effort that includes scenery by James Noone, costumes by Michael Krass, and lighting by Michael Philippi.

There's no best of performance in the show. James Alexander, Todd E. Pettiford, Dana Dawson, Soara-Joye Ross and Terita Redd are equally talented and polished. Individually and collectively they are "cookin'" from the opening number to the finale. Each has a great vocal range and their own stage magic.

The energy coming off the Boston University Theatre stage will get you clapping your hands, stomping your feet and if you are not shy could possibly have you dancing in the aisles. "Ain't Misbehavin'" is more than a tribute to Fats Waller, it is a tribute to what makes live theatre a cathartic experience that can't be matched by film, television, DVD, and computer games.

So unless "Your Feet's Too Big" let them take you to Huntington Avenue and find out why you "Ain't Misbehavin'."

"Ain't Misbehavin',"Huntington Theatre Company, 264 Huntington Avenue, Boston, tickets available On-line at www.huntingtontheatre.org, or through the box office 617-266-0800, Performances through October19th , Ticket Prices \$14-\$69. Running time 2 hours.

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