

Arts & Entertainment

'Ain't Misbehavin'' brings Waller music to life

The fabulous music of the legendary Fats Waller fills the Elizabeth Wallace Theater at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina for "Ain't Misbehavin'," a Tony Award-winning production that runs through Aug. 7.

Since its Broadway debut in 1978, the show hasn't lost any of its sass or appeal. And its historic importance remains unchallenged — it inspired a host of other song anthology shows, but it remains the best example of the genre.

Richard Maltby Jr. and Murray Horowitz wove together some 30 songs either composed by Waller or associated with him. A cast of two men and three women perform the tunes as solos or ensembles, accompanied by a small on-stage band, and spiced with liberal doses of dynamite dancing.

The scene is New York City in the 1920s and '30s, a time when black musicians earned their living playing for a white audiences, but gathered in Harlem after the shows to play together in now famous and legendary jam sessions.

Although Waller died at the young age of 39, he composed more than 450 songs and recorded extensively. The tunes included in "Ain't Misbehavin'" illustrate a variety of moods and roles that the composer had to

assume. They encompass Broadway tunes, such as the title song; highly sophisticated compositions such as "Jitterbug Waltz"; humorous songs like "Your Feet Too Big," "Fat and Greasy," and "The Viper's Song"; and the poignant "Black and Blue" that stops the show as Waller drops his clown mask with an emotional cry of frustration from the black musician.

Female cast members are Tiffany Breeding, a skilled and talented dancer; Gabrielle Lee, a secure and polished soprano; and Savannah vocalist Comia Flynn Knight, whose warm, mellow contralto assumes the role that made Nell Carter famous.

Terrence McKinnley Clowe and A. Gregory Harris round out the cast, with Clowe's phenomenal dancing and Harris' rich voice and uncanny resemblance to Wallace.

All five actors are masters of comic timing, facial expression and body language.

Although Breeding sings well with a pleasant voice, it is immediately obvious that dance is her thing as she moves her lithe body through its paces. She delivers a great comic performance as a radio singer in "Yacht



Louise Lewis

Club Swing."

Lee followed with an equally fine and funny radio performance of "When Nylons Bloom Again." She moves and dances well, but singing is her major talent, as exhibited by her secure extended range. Not only an excellent comic performer, her interpretation of "Squeeze Me" also places her securely in the upper ranks of female torch singers.

Knight's deep contralto voice also can command center stage in dramatically different moods. Her version of "Cash for Your Trash" was hilarious and "Mean to Me" was poignantly sung.

Clowe's performance of "The Viper's Drag" was a show-stopper. Talking almost as much as he sang, the actor assumed a wide range of lascivious facial expressions and contorted his agile body around his lines. On the other hand, he can partner with one of the women in an elegant, Fred Astaire style ballroom dance with suave dignity.

Harris, to further compliment his Walleresque good looks, spent much of the show wearing characteristic period clothing — a brown, double-breasted suit topped with a dashing fedora and polished off with natty spectators. While not the agile dancer that Clowe is, he moves his large frame well

and his deep, rich voice combines with a secure comic timing in portrayals that range from commanding to whimsical. The audience loved his version of "Your Feet Too Big," complete with growling and strutting.

Director and choreographer Russell Garrett has done an excellent job preparing his well-chosen cast for this production. Lighting designer Terry Cermak has provided superlative support with a seamless flow of well-chosen effects. Jennifer Correll's costumes are visually stunning and well fitting. The dresses for the opening numbers could use a little more glitz, a few more sequins and beads.

Musical director Penny Rose led a proficient little quartet from on stage. She played an accurate, well-balanced piano, with David Kimbell on bass, Gavan Daly on drums and Ed Evans on reeds.

"Ain't Misbehavin'" runs through Aug. 7, with 8 p.m. showtimes. Additional June 27 performances are at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. Tickets are \$35 to \$38, with half price for students age 16 or younger. For more information, call 842-2787.

Louise Causey Lewis reviews arts events for *The Island Packet*.