Jazzy ‘Night’ goes down easy

By Robert Hurwitt
CHRONICLE THEATER CRITIC

Satin-voiced Leslie Ivy, accompanied by versatile bassist Marcus Shelby, croons a seductively swinging “Summertime” to open the show and a buoyant “Blue Skies” before the second act. With acts like that, L. Peter Callender sets the bar both high and homey for his “Twelfth Night,” the noted local Shakespearean actor’s directorial debut with African-American Shakespeare Company.

For the final show of his first season as artistic director, Callender delivers a somewhat raw, unevenly performed but highly accessible, personable and very funny version of one of the world’s greatest comedies. Not to mention jazzy. This is “Twelfth Night” in 1940s San Francisco, as signaled not just by the cable cars and bay-scape of Kemit Amenophis’ scene paintings, the hairstyles and the puff-sleeved gowns and zoot suits of Kristen Lowe’s costumes, but also by Shelby’s score and George Gershwin and Irving Berlin arrangements.

Some of the dialogue isn’t clear. Nuance in delivery and characterization is often missing. A few lines and lyrics were noticeably flubbed on opening night. But Callender makes sure that the action flows pretty well, the outlines of every character and the story are vivid, and the comedy shines through on every level — from most of the key line readings and the over-the-top antics of Charles Branklyn as the jester Feste and Martin Grizzell Jr.’s foppish Sir Andrew Aguecheek to the frozen stare of Unique Jenkins or aggressive glare of Pericval Arcival in walk-on roles.

A few crowd-pleasing performances help enormously. Rebecca Frank stands out as the beauteous Olivia, bringing an intelligent charm and latent sexuality to her rejection of the relentless wooing of the smitten Duke Orsino (a clear, strong Matt Jones). Her calm command makes it all the funnier when she falls hard for Orsino’s new messenger, Viola, not knowing the young man is really a woman.

Renée Wilson is an unusually understated and high-pitched Viola, but Callender uses her very well. When she sings of unrequited love — a heartbreaking, bluesy plaint in the finest of Shelby’s song settings — Callender turns what’s usually one of Feste’s songs into an achingly premonition of Orsino falling for Viola in the end. The way she sings, who wouldn’t?

Lauren Spencer anchors the comedy of Olivia’s household beautifully as a bright, infectiously mischievous maid Maria. Rómulo Torres makes an oddly perfect, counterintuitive fit as Viola’s look-alike brother, and Armando McClain is a potent presence as his friend Antonio.

The result may not be a “Twelfth Night” for aficionados, but it’s a remarkably entertaining one — and something more. In its clarity, occasional inspired choices and warm multicultural embrace, it’s a welcoming introduction to the pleasures of the Bard.