

# Race, Class, Music: PCS's 'Black Pearl Sings!'

By Lisa Loving  
Of The Skanner News

Stunning Portland theatre fans with her incredible voice and talent, Chicago-born actress Chavez Ravine stars with Lena Kaminsky in "Black Pearl Sings!" The play by Frank Higgins tells the story of a 1930s music scholar who strikes up a relationship with an incarcerated

to be an academic in her profession, but not being taken seriously. And they find each other because one is a song collector, she's been a song collector for quite some years, and she's honed in on trying to find a song that links to Africa. She finds Pearl – or Alberta Johnson – who may be the link she's trying to find because so much history was lost in the transatlantic slave trade.

to know that probably 95 percent of them had never heard that song before and now they're singing it.

For tickets to Black Pearl Sings! Go to [www.pcs.org](http://www.pcs.org), or call the toll-free ticket line at 877-PCS-TKTS (877-727-8587). Purchase tickets in person at the box office, at 128 NW Eleventh Ave. in the Pearl District.



Lena Kaminsky, at left, with Chavez Ravine, right, in 'Black Pearl Sings!'

singer, Pearl, to mine her family history. The show is a musical tour de force for Ravine, who is performing with PCS for the first time.

In a related story, the Red Door Project is holding theatre chat sessions on women and race, June 10 and 17, after the Sunday matinee performances; more details are below.

The Skanner News spoke with Ravine about her career, her music, and "Black Pearl Sings!" The show runs through June 17, but you should get tickets as soon as possible because the final two weeks are already starting to sell out.

**The Skanner News:** Late last year Portland Center Stage mounted an all-Black production of "Oklahoma!" Right now, alongside "Pearl," PCS is showing "It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues." How is it that PCS seems to be squarely raising issues of race these days?

**Chavez Ravine:** I think (Artistic Director) Chris Coleman has a lot to do with that. He has a wonderful vision.

**TSN:** What is the play about?

**CR:** "Black Pearl Sings!" is about two women who find themselves stuck in one way or the other – one who's stuck in prison trying to find her daughter; so not only is she stuck by the system, she's stuck by racism and being incarcerated.

And the other, the white woman, Susannah, is a woman stuck in a man's world who can't seem to break the ceiling of wanting to be an educator, wanting

**TSN:** What's your favorite part of the show?

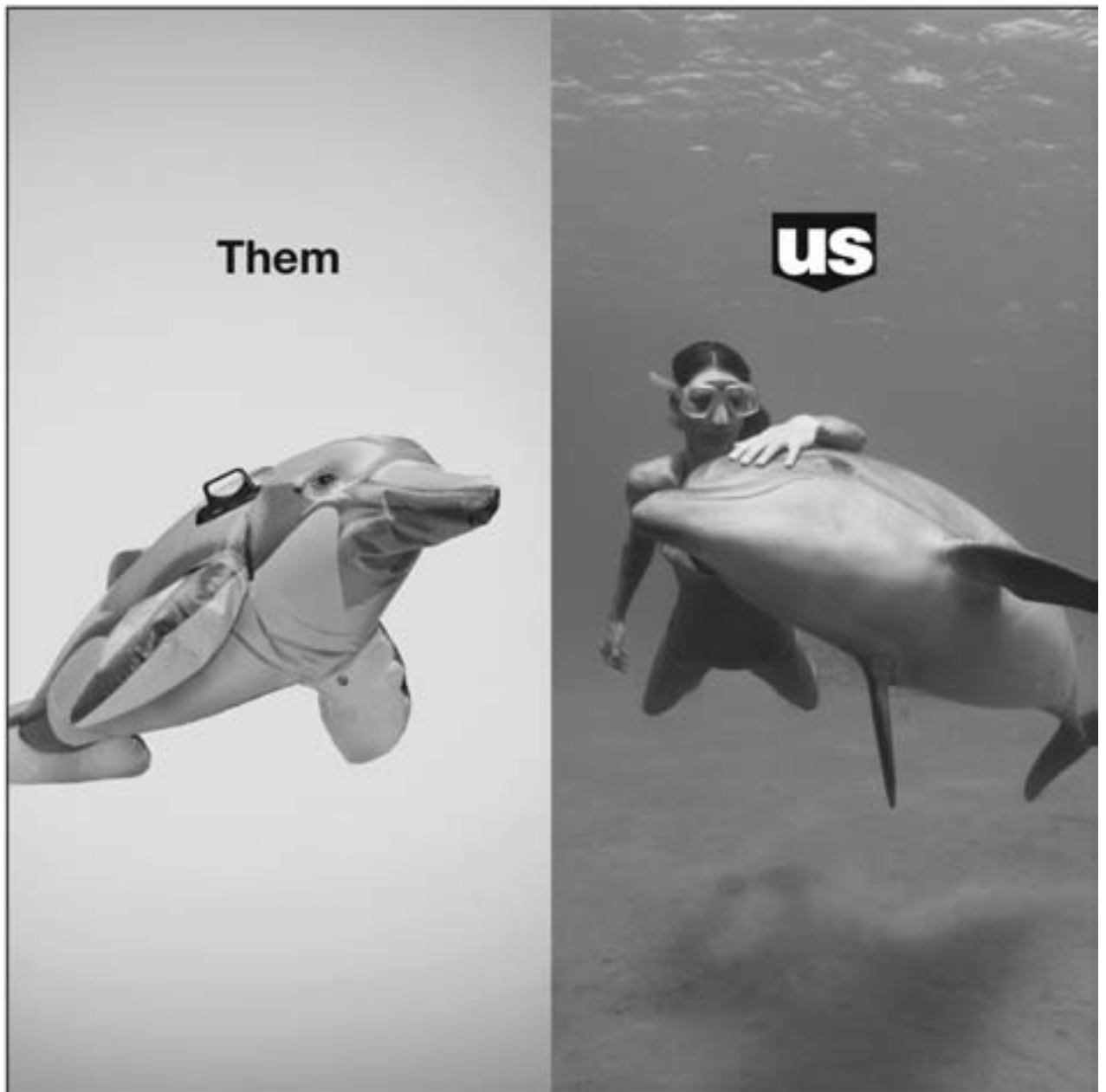
**CR:** The one part that was very daunting to me was the Coopers Union part where the audience gets a chance to sing along. And to hear the audience singing a song that was a message song from the Underground Railroad, or the auction block song, or the Kumbaya song, and to have them know where these songs came from, I think that's quite moving.

We're doing a call and response and I'm having the audience sing, 'Many thousand gone.' Because there is a song that goes, 'No more auction block for me/No more no more/No more auction block for me/Many thousand gone.' And to have them feel what that song means and

## Women and Race

Lesli Mones of the August Wilson Red Door Project leads talks on women and race at PCS Sunday, June 10 and June 17, at 4:30 p.m. Panelists include Leslie Dunlop, assistant professor of History, Women and Gender, and American Ethnic Studies programs, Willamette University; and Donna Maxey, retired educator and creator/director of Race Talks.

The discussions are in the Ellyn Bye Studio immediately following the Sunday matinee performances (tickets are sold out for June 10). Admission to the discussions is free. No RSVP or ticket is required.



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