

Saddleback's rousing 'Ain't Misbehavin'' captures Waller

By Eric Marchese
Special to the Register

An infectious good humor ripples through the music of Thomas "Fats" Waller. Waller earned his nickname not only for his girth — 285 pounds — but for his enormous appetite for life. When not making roughly 500 recordings, writing two Broadway shows and several revues or composing more than 400 piano scores and songs, Waller made time to feed his loves of food, liquor and good times — and died of pneumonia at age 39 in 1943.

"Ain't Misbehavin'" — the Waller revue assembled in 1978 by Richard Maltby Jr. — has Waller's legendary personality stamped all over it, and Saddleback College uses this joyful show to celebrate its silver anniversary and 15th-an-

'Ain't Misbehavin''

■ **What:** Revue of Fats Waller music, based on an idea by Murray Horwitz and Richard Maltby Jr. Conceived and originally directed by Maltby.

■ **Where:** Saddleback College, McKinney Theatre, 28000 Mar-

guerite Parkway, Mission Viejo.

■ **Continues:** Through Aug. 16. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays, 3 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sunday

■ **How much:** \$15

■ **Ticket availability:** Limited

for some performances

■ **Performance length:** 2 hours

UFBOX Suitability: Not suitable for children

■ **Call:** 582-4656

nual Summer Stock season in high style. The revue format suits Waller's music, encompassing not only his divergent venues of Broadway and Harlem but the musical styles that influenced him: ragtime and stride piano, gospel and church organ, blues, black folk songs and the range of popular US music of the 1920s to early 1940s. Waller's hard-hitting, swingy playing style, in turn, helped generate the popularity of swing music.

Not all the music of "Ain't Misbehavin'" is strictly that of Waller and his various lyricists. The consummate cabaret and party performer, Waller was always ready to feature the hot songs of his day. Act 2 features a dozen tunes by other writers, a handful of which became hits in Waller's hands.

At Saddleback, this entertaining show is sly and breezy, ebullient and flamboyant. Even less overtly comical numbers evidence the

command and self-assurance director Adleane Hunter and musical director Debbi Ebert bring to their material. Ebert gives the three-woman, three-man cast (herself included) rich vocal harmonies, often with six vocal lines going at once. The show starts with a broad sampler of Waller greats (the title song, "Honeysuckle Rose," "Squeeze Me"), then veers toward swing and jitterbug.

As Maltby conceived the revue,

its "characters" represent Waller's world of Harlem "rent" parties — uptown blacks who had worked their way up and could afford to enjoy what life had to offer.

Saddleback's sextet has the right whimsical tone in manner and vocal intonation. Ebert shines throughout, especially in a rich blues number, "Mean To Me." Jeff Coopwood plays the dapper, cheerful, self-confident man about town, capturing Waller's Harlem style with "Your Feet's Too Big." Michael Larche portrays a more earthy persona, while Henry Weaver offers Waller's shadier, more outrageous numbers.

Although not billed as such, pianist Richard Abraham is the on-stage Waller personified, conducting the six-piece orchestra while seated astride the bench of an upright piano.