



CurtainUp

The Internet Theater Magazine of Reviews, Features, Annotated Listings

A *CurtainUp* Review

Black Nativity

By Paulanne Simmons

*Welcome! Come on y'all.
Come on in from the darkness
and into the light. Come from
the Great White Way to God's
Great Light Way.
.—Narrator*



Andre De Shields and Tracy Jack in *Black Nativity*

Langston Hughes' gospel song play *Black Nativity* is returning to Times Square for the first time since its Broadway debut 46 years ago, and that's good news. Originally called *Wasn't that a Mighty Day?* it featured Alvin Ailey and was performed in dialogue, narrative, pantomime, dance and song. The music was in the tradition of gospel and folk spirituals.

Classical Theatre of Harlem's new production, directed by CTH's co-founder Alfred Preisser and choreographed by Tracy Jack, is set in 1973 Times Square, but musically and thematically it shows the influence of the twenty-first century. The songs incorporate not only gospel ("Wasn't that a Mighty Day?" "Christ Is Born," "Jesus on the Mainline") but also rap ("Livin' on the Deuce") R&B ("Pity and Shame"), soul, and funk. And there are references to WMDs and the country at war.

Would Hughes have minded? One suspects not at all. He wrote *Black Nativity* to reflect the black experience in America in the mid-twentieth century. The music was rooted in what could be heard in black churches and on the streets. It was driven by the daily experiences of the average person of that time. That the play would change with the people it speaks for should not be a surprise.

In Classical Theatre of Harlem's adaptation the streets are inhabited by hookers, hustlers and the homeless. The story of Jesus' birth is told by a charismatic street preacher —the stupendous Broadway veteran Andre De Shields— who also happens to be a terrific singer and dancer.

After the opening number, the scene shifts to a church where the choir helps the preacher tell the story through song and dance. Joseph (Enrique Cruz DeJesus) and Mary (Tracy Jack) enter, looking for a place to stay for the

night. They are snubbed and scorned by the people who see them passing by. Jesus is born. The wise men bring gifts.

The show's highlights are too numerous to set down completely. Suffice it to mention a few: Mary's dance/delivery of her baby; the Motown version of "Go Tell It on a Mountain" performed by DeJesus, Alexander Elisa, Melvin Bell III and Rejinald Woods; audience participation that turns the audience into a congregation and the show into a service; and the deeply moving "Silent Night/7 O'clock News," in which the preacher reads the horrific newspaper headlines and The Shangilia Youth Choir sings angelically.

Troy Hourie's modular set allows the musician to sit above the stage, in full view of the audience, on metal platforms, where they can interact with the actors. This set, with its metallic red curtain, also helps blur the lines between biblical story, church service and staged musical. Costume designer Kimberly Glennon enhances this effect by dressing the performers in the kind of dresses and suits preferred by Las Vegas performers.

Hughes wrote *Black Nativity* late in his life when he became interested in African American spirituality and the oral tradition of the African American church. Classical Theatre of Harlem's brilliant and enthusiastic interpretation of this masterpiece proves that this tradition is still vibrant, fertile and especially well suited to celebrate the spirit of joy and peace during the holiday season.

BLACK NATIVITY

Written by Langston Hughes

Directed by Alfred Preisser

Cast: Andre De Shields (Narrator/Pastor); Tracy Jack (Mary); Enrique Cruz DeJesus (Joseph); Melvin Bell III; Laiona Michelle; Nikki Stephenson; Tryphena Wade; Rejinald Woods; Phyre Hawkins; Alexander Elisa; Ebony Blake; The Shangilia Youth Choir

Musical Director: Kelvyn Bell

Choreographer: Tracy Jack

Scenic Designer: Troy Hourie

Lighting Designer: Aaron Black

Costume Designer: Kimberly Glennon

Running Time: 90 minutes, no intermission

The Duke on 42nd Street (between 7th and 8th avenues), 229 West 42nd Street

From 11/30/07, opening 12/2/07, closing 12/30/07

Tues — Fri at 7:30 p.m., Sat at 2 & 7:30 p.m.; Sun at 1 and 6 p.m.

Added Wed matinees 12/19/07 & 12/26/07 at 2 p.m., no performance on 12/8/07 & 12/25/07

Tickets: \$50 (646) 223-3030 or DukeOn42.org

Reviewed by Paulanne Simmons at 12/2/07 press preview.