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ARTS & LETTERS

THEATER

Miracle On 42nd Street

By **JOY GOODWIN**

When "Black Nativity," a gospel musical with a slim book by Langston Hughes, opened on Broadway in 1961, the very notion of an all-black re-enactment of the birth of Jesus was acutely politicized. (Original cast members Alvin Ailey and Carmen de Lavallade, concerned about the separation implied by the title, quit before opening night.) Almost half a century later, the novelty of a black Mary, Joseph, and Jesus has

BLACK NATIVITY

Duke on 42nd Street

worn off. But Hughes's essential concept — that of an unfussy Christmas show that bristles with life, celebrating black musical traditions — still captivates, and the Classical Theatre of Harlem's rollicking new production of "Black Nativity," now at the Duke on 42nd Street, is a joy.

Now, as then, there isn't much in the way of story in "Black Nativity" — most of the lines function as song cues in a musical revue. But artistic director Alfred Preisser stages the parade of 20 songs (about half from Hughes's original playlist) with aplomb. Mr. Preisser can do loud and fun (a gospel choir belting and dancing) or quiet and poignant (the angel of the Lord as a shy young girl, in a white party dress with ribbons). In either mode, the splendid cast and four-piece band are sincere and direct. Mr. Preisser sets the main action on the 42nd Street of 1973, with neon theater signs of the era offering both legitimate and X-rated shows. The first two songs (both new, and penned by musical director Kelvyn Bell) are performed by a chorus of hard-luck characters: hookers and hobos and dealers, two Black Israelites, and a mom pulling her son away from the three-card monte table. Troy Hourie's clever set design places the four band members in separate elevated cages on stilts with wheels; one story above the

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street-level action, the band members are a vibrant yet nonintrusive presence.

Soon the musician-cages are swept to the sides, showing a telethon-like set of shallow steps and a giant Mylar curtain — in other words, church. Through the curtain bursts the Narrator (the incomparable André De Shields), his skinny, loose-limbed frame draped in a fire-engine-red suit with cowhide accents. Part gospel preacher, part James Brown, he jukes and shimmies around the stage, pausing to deliver a bit of wisdom or a full-throttle burst of song. He's a showman with a message — several, actually — and somehow, in Mr. De Shields's delightful performance, neither the show nor the message ever seems fake.

As in Hughes's original, the Narrator steers the ship, moving the nativity story along, egging on the choir, and delivering a brief mid-show sermon. But, as is tradition in the countless local productions of "Black Nativity" that have proliferated throughout the country since 1961, Mr. Preisser has substantially reconfigured Hughes's original text, adding and subtracting songs, dialogue, and dance numbers.

So funk and blues make several welcome appearances in the gospel-infused score, and Mary (Tracy Jack, who is also the choreographer) performs a '70s-inflected dance solo just before giving birth. Mary and Joseph, who are mute in Hughes's original, speak a few lines each into the preacher's mike. For much of the second half, Mr. Preisser replaces Hughes's suggested tunes with song-and-dance numbers performed in the styles of the Temptations, Gladys Knight and the Pips, and the Jackson Five.

Perhaps Mr. Preisser's most moving innovation is the casting of the Shangilia Youth Choir of Kenya as the Chorus of Angels. Their delight in performing songs and back handsprings is palpable, and the authenticity they exude is the lifeblood of this unusual show.

Rarely in the theater do weighty concerns such as the plight of a pregnant teen with nowhere to go co-exist with so much jubilation. Yet through its abundance of spirit, this "Black Nativity" makes pain and joy seem the natural responses of any open heart.

(Until December 30, 229 W. 42nd St., between Seventh and Eighth avenues, 646-223-3010).