



THE NEW YORKER

THE NEW YORKER

Goings On About Town: The Theatre

Black Nativity Now

At the beginning of this dazzling show, a musician (Kelvyn Bell, who composed the original score) steps onstage with an electric guitar and describes the church of his youth, built on the muddy ground of Buckwater, Missouri. "I just wanted to share some of the love, and some of the mud," he explains, launching into the gospel standard "Up Above My Head." There's a lot more love and mud to come: for the next eighty minutes, the ensemble just keeps topping itself in a blend of modern-dress nativity story, rousing revival meeting, and, most of all, first-rate soul-gospel revue. Alfred Preisser, director and co-writer (with Tracy Jack), lends wit and vitality to the tropes of each of these forms; it's a rare pageant that delivers this much warmth, energy, and depth of feeling.

NEW YORK POST

The gospel truth is, it's entertaining

By FRANK SCHECK

Performed, appropriately enough, at St. Clement's, a former church, the piece features an exuberant pastor (Nikkieli DeMone); a four-piece band led by Kelvyn Bell, a terrific Mississippi-based guitarist who also wrote the mostly original gospel score; a nine-member chorus; and adorable 9-year-old Naja Jack as an angel. As young as she is, Naja's a veteran performer, having played the baby Jesus in the 2001 production. Naja Jack as an angel. As young as she is, Naja's a veteran performer, having played the baby

Jesus in the 2001 production.



Lia Chang

Breanna Bartley (center) dances up a storm as a very pregnant Mary in this fun holiday musical.

A series of rousing musical numbers accompanies the story of Joseph (Jarvis B. Manning Jr.) and the heavily pregnant Mary (Breanna Bartley) -- whose condition doesn't prevent her from breaking out some serious dance moves -- as they make their way to the manger.

Much of the fun stems from the unorthodox depictions of the classic biblical characters, from the hipster, sunglasses-wearing shepherds to the Afro-haired, platform-shoed Three Wise Men.

One of the most powerful segments has the pastor mournfully reading apocalyptic news stories -- from The Post, natch -- while the chorus sings a moving "Silent Night."



Black Nativity Now

Directed by Alfred Preisser

Choreographer by Tracy Jack

Original Score and Musical Direction by Kelvyn Bell

Review by Ethan Kanfer

Replete with an infectious energy and a dazzling display of musical talent, *Black Nativity Now* manages to strike a perfect balance. It is sentimental without being cloying, and deeply spiritual without being preachy.

Chorus leader Jeff Bolding leads a powerhouse vocal ensemble (Breanna Bartley, Melanie Charles, Tracy Jack, Vincent Leggett, Britney Mack, Jarvis B. Manning, Jr., Amma Osei and Stephen Scott Wormley) through a variety of musical genres ranging from traditional Christmas carols to gospel, pop, jazz, and even a bit of rap. Guitarist and musical director Kelvyn Bell rounds out the sonic menu with a few soulful Blues ballads. Jovial but impassioned homily is provided by Bishop Nikkieli DeMone.

Writer/director Alfred Preisser and set designer Evan Collier make ample use of St. Clement's deep stage, while Tracy Jack's choreography and Mia Bienovich's costumes add a rich sense of pageantry to the proceedings.

Amid all the color, humor and verve, though, *Nativity* wisely takes a few quiet moments to lead the audience in contemplation of the true meaning of Christmas. At one point, a chorus member reads of war and poverty in the daily newspaper: a gentle admonition that our holiday merrymaking should be tempered with remembrance. On a more encouraging note, a very young guest vocalist stands up in an angelic white dress to deliver a beautiful hymn. It's a welcome reminder that one of the things Christmas is about is a celebration of children and new beginnings. Although it can't be easy growing up in these uncertain times, the warm supportive community around the young singer creates the impression that she and her generation will do just fine. And that message, more than any colored lights or stars atop the trees, is enough to brighten anyone's Christmas.