



Joyful noise

Best of Both Worlds rocks *The Winter's Tale*

By CAROLYN CLAY | December 9, 2009



WILL AND GRACE Shakespeare's time- and kingdom-hopping fairy tale becomes a furious and funny funk opera with one foot in R&B, the other in the black church.

From the clamorous arrival of some ghetto hot wheels to a scorching gospel finale, *Best of Both Worlds* warms up *The Winter's Tale*. The third entry in American Repertory Theater's Shakespeare Exploded! Festival, this sizzling and soulful gloss on the Bard's late romance (at the Loeb Drama Center through January 3) mines Shakespeare's time- and realm-hopping fairy tale — here rooted in a falling out between rhythm-and-blues kingpins — for all its raging irrationality and redemptive magic, transforming it into a furious and funny funk opera with one foot in R&B, the other in the black church. The show contains only shards of real and faux Shakespeare, but the compelling score by Dierdre Murray, poured over pipes that will bring you alternately to your feet and your knees, packs an eloquence of its own.

Rookie ART artistic director Diane Paulus and writer spouse Randy Weiner bring all the pulsing, destructive energy of Studio 54 to *The Donkey Show*, their disco riff on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But the connection the pair perceive between *The Winter's Tale* — with its surge of reasonless jealousy ebbing into long atonement and unlikely reprieve — and the gospel-and-blues vernacular feels more integral. Weiner's lyrics are often banal, and one winces at the writer's plundering of some of the hoarier clichés of urban black culture. Yet the excellent all-black cast, taking its cue from Cleavant Derricks's droll narrator, puts this stuff across so slyly that scant offense accrues. What little there is gets hosed away by the raw power of the musical performance.

Moreover, Weiner revs Shakespeare's farfetched plot with a powerful engine of spiritual belief, peppering both script and lyrics with New Testament as well as Shakespearean allusion. Serena, the wronged "queen" of R&B "king" Ezekiel, echoes the original play's assertion that "a sad tale's best for winter," blanketing her young son in a mournful lullaby just before the shit hits the fan. But by and large, *Best of Both Worlds* lights an ardent yet mischievous, miracle-fanning fire under the Bard's fable.

Not that Weiner beats logic or cohesion into *The Winter's Tale*. Ezekiel, overblowing in his mind's eye some belly nuzzling of his pregnant wife by friend and fellow music-industry royal Maurice, viciously rejects his queen, causing their young son to pine and die, then banishes the baby daughter he is convinced isn't his to the cruel elements of the urban wild as both his prophesying mother and a tolling chorus predict no happiness "till that baby comes home." Sixteen years (and an amusingly raunchy gambit in the club opened by the panhandler who rescued the baby) pass before she *does* come home. And that miracle begets another, with director Paulus, an artful hand on the spigot, allowing the emotion to eke exquisitely before opening the floodgates and bringing on a full gospel choir for a rollicking, redemptive finale.

Composer Murray says she wanted the music for *Best of Both Worlds* to be "magisterial," and there are regal elements in both score and staging. Paulus's production does not shy from moments of calm and even silence between musical tempests. These include a harmonic trio that precedes the quietly tuneful death, in a circle of light, of young prince Mamillius, who's portrayed by Sebastien Lucien with a mix of sweet composure and smooth moves.

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