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Motown: The Musical

by Daniel Scheffler

EDGE Contributor

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Valisia LeKae as Diana Ross and Brandon Victor

There is only way to describe **"Motown: the Musical"** and that is totally groovy. It seems obvious but as the crowd, even skeptical New Yorkers, bobbed their heads, yelped again and again and sang along, the groove was seeping from the stage and down into the feet (now tapping furiously), the arms, and the noodles of the audience. Could it mean that the show presents the perfect night out in New York, the perfect night that people travel across oceans to come and experience on Broadway: I would say "yeah baby."

Motown, almost named "motortown," was a record company founded by Berry Gordy Jr. (played by Brandon Victor Dixon) in 1959 in; you guessed it, Motor City Detroit, Michigan. What made the movement prolific was that it brought the racial integration of popular music to the fore as it was no longer a choice made by mainstream radio stations but basically forced onto them, due to incredible popular demand, to play the funky music and celebrate it not as "black music" but as "music."

The play showcases this beautiful integration so smartly with the proverbial white record bosses using



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Dixon as Berry Gordy (Source:Joan Marcus)

music's part in the time's racial struggles.

The story opens with Berry listening to a boxing fight on the radio that was famously won by a black American, and his father and mother telling him that it's not a celebration of blackness but a celebration of Americanism. That sets the tone for the rest of the production -- Motown was no doubt going to infiltrate the world and it will come with a Yankee flag and maybe even some of the accent and attitude.

Motown, after all, is a type of soul music that, although pop-like, used tambourines and melodic bass-guitar lines, chord structures and a call response style that is reminiscent of gospel music. So famously producers of Motown believed in the principle of "Keep It Simple Stupid" and avoided melodrama and complex arrangements. The show keeps to this bonfire as it tells a simple story and relies on the transience of the cast's voices and dancing ability to carry the musical.

The songs are familiar, the crowds love them naturally and so will every single person who goes to see the show. It sets back time to a fun music era where the beats, the rhythm and the jollification was just a record away.



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where the beats, the rhythm and the jollification were just a record away. Diana Ross even gets the crowd involved as she pulls up the most unassuming theatre watchers, who all appeared to be out-of-towners, to sing a little line and become her prey to flirt with in her signature overly carnal way.

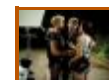
Speaking of Diana Ross, Valisia Lekae manages to do the best version of the self-important, slightly delusional, always needy (and let's not forget those hands, arms and fingers), darling Miss Ross. Her scenes start from the tiny torso of this actress and swell exponentially to sling across the theatre with

that heinous 'n' word and looking pretty old-school pathetic, and the inclusion of both JFK's and Dr. Martin Luther King's assassinations as an indication of the

And so the story flows, Berry takes on all the singing greats ranging from Stevie Wonder (played by talented youngster Raymond Luke J.R. complete with an overbearing, demanding mother) to Diana Ross (Valisia Lekae, the hands down star of the entire show). He tackles Smokey Robinson (played by the likeable Charl Brown) and Marvin Gaye (a fabulously smooth Bryan Terrell Clark) and starts to rake in the dough. With a big discovery of the Jackson Five and little Michael Jackson and a move to Los Angeles the music, the business and his love relationship with The Supremes star Diana Ross are heightened and propelled into the fast lane.

So with money trouble and some backstabbing and shuffling of record contracts Motown Records looks like it may be in trouble. It's perfect material for a musical, as there is nothing better for a musical production that tackling an almost down-and-out disaster. Everyone in, everyone dancing and singing and on board means of course the business will be saved.

The songs are familiar, the crowds love them naturally and so will every person who goes to see the show. It sets back time to a fun music era



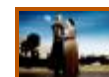
Director Derek Cianfrance's newest film, "The Place Beyond the Pines" is epic in scope - covering two generations of cops & criminals in Schenectady, NY. EDGE spoke to the director about how his film, which stars Ryan Gosling & Bradley Co...



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bravado and deft supremacy. With "Reach Out and Touch (Somebody's Hand)" audience members holler Diana's name as she actually comes down in all her glory through Valisia Lekae on stage; breathtaking to see in the flesh, the crowd heaves.

The big budget of the show is not concealed; impressive sets coming in from the skies, glamorous outfits (including dresses that sparkle so much they blind even the queens and then the bright-colored suits that kaleidoscope in their range) and perfect lighting and sound quality in every scene.

But then again this is Broadway. London impotently tries and so do other tiny cities but only Broadway really puts out. And by out, I mean all out. Signed, sealed, delivered baby.

"Motown: The Musical" enjoys an extended run at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, 205 West 46th St. For information or tickets, call 877-250-2929 or visit <http://www.motownthemusical.com/#tickets-page>

Daniel Scheffler is a writer who spends his time in New York, Cape Town and India. Follow him on Twitter @danielscheffler

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