

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Theater: *Motown: The Musical* a Missed Opportunity

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MOTOWN: THE MUSICAL ** out of **
LUNT FONTANNE THEATRE**

This musical begins in the home of Motown founder Berry Gordy in Los Angeles in 1983. Gordy debates whether or not to show up for the taping of a TV special honoring the 25th anniversary of his iconic label. (As if.) We see Gordy grumbling in a shabby little wood-paneled living room even though Gordy would sell the label for \$61 million just five years later. In the set design by David Korins, a color TV is downstage, its bulky, unattractive back jutting out towards the audience. Who wants to see the back of a TV? No one.

Motown The Musical has the same problem as this set. Who wants to see the ugly backside of a record label? The book by Gordy -- based on his own, self-serving memoir -- is filled with deals and contracts and who is suing who and who broke their contract when and why. What you don't see is the artistic birth of a song, the famous molding of acts or singers coming into their own.

We get obvious moments like Gordy tossing out ideas about what to call his new record company and a good joke about Smokey Robinson following up his #1 hit "My Guy" with a new song called "My Girl." But the joy of music is almost always overshadowed by money, with Gordy invariably the put-upon maestro who just wanted to be a big family and always treated everyone fairly. Smokey (Charl Brown) seems like a lackey here rather than the key top executive who helped run Motown. If a songwriting team sues Gordy, they're being tempted into it by greedy lawyers. Gordy might sue to get them back, but it's done out of love. Their lawsuits, on the other hand, are nasty and personal. (The truth is that Gordy was probably no worse than most other record label executives at the time that made tons of money off their acts and reaped most of the rewards -- but he certainly wasn't any better.)

Real-life assistants get name-checked as if the show were one long acknowledgments page, Diana Ross gets groomed for superstardom, a pint-sized Michael Jackson and the Jackson 5 wow in an audition and the signposts of an era inevitably rush by. (It's awful to sigh in boredom when JFK's assassination occurs but that's how pro forma it feels here.) Lost amidst Gordy's life story from little boy to embittered millionaire? The music.

Motown: The Musical features three new songs co-written by Gordy and Michael Lovesmith, all of them banal showstoppers in the wrong sense of the word. "Hey Joe (Black Like Me)" is about the celebration of boxer Joe Louis, followed immediately by bromides from Gordy's father urging his son to "be the best you that you can be." Another tune -- "It's What's in the Grooves That Counts" -- demonstrates exactly what it's saying, as in this song is not a hit. Finally, Gordy's 11:00 o'clock number is a bombastic "Can I Close The Door." Brandon Victor Dixon has the thankless role of embodying Gordy and singing some of these numbers, as well as chiming in on various other tunes. Certainly a compelling work of art could be made out of Gordy's fascinating career, but Gordy himself is not the person to tell it.

Valisia Lekae has the even more daunting task of embodying Diana Ross. She does well in the acting scenes and comes into her own in a solo turn on "Reach Out And Touch" where she gamely interacts with the audience in full diva mode. Obviously, none of the many talented performers on stage can hold a candle to the legends or classic recordings they're tackling. But they are talented and the durability of those same classics make their performances entertaining. What's remarkable is how often the book by Gordy and inevitably the staging by director Charles Randolph-Wright get in the way of those songs. Hearing a tune performed completely or given a full-on musical treatment (like Act One highlight "Dancing In The Street") is a bizarrely rare occurrence.

More often you get a glimpse of life at Motown, such as the weekly meetings where the staff voted on new tunes. The no-hit Supremes became a running joke until they finally click on a hit. The trio strides confidently on stage, clapping their hands and delivering the instant classic "Where Did Our Love Go." Then it stops and a new scene begins, then the song picks up in the middle, then another scene intrudes and then the song finally ends. If you're looking for a way to leech the excitement out of a great pop song, that's how to do it. This happens again and again to song after song, making *Motown: The Musical* one of the most frustrating shows around. It's bursting with great songs but someone keeps changing the dial on the radio before they're over.

The audience didn't seem to mind so much. They gave entrance applause to some of the little known cast, not because they were fans of the actors: they were applauding the musical legends those actors were portraying. When Raymond Luke Jr. comes out as Michael Jackson in those awesome early 1970s outfits and he and the Jackson Five launch into a medley of their early hits, the immediate charge pulsing through the crowd wasn't just for a young actor who could sing and dance with aplomb. It was for the real Michael Jackson and best of all the young Michael Jackson before his complicated private life made it harder to celebrate his musical genius. That medley is unquestionably another highlight, along with "Do You Love Me" by the Contours.

It seems funny to wish a show were less ambitious. But if only *Motown: The Musical* had simply created the greatest Motown revue that never happened, a fantasy concert that just let one act after another come out on stage and deliver their hits. They wouldn't even need to bother with a voice of God narration telling the story of Motown. Just give us the hits.

The costumes by Esosa are great fun and combine with the choreography of Patricia Wilcox & Warren Adams and the lighting of Natasha Katz to recreate the Motown look with loving fidelity. They could have added and subtracted songs in this revue as new talent was cast in various roles -- God knows Motown has the catalog to do it. Found a great ringer for Levi Stubbs? Add in more Four Tops! One year after it opened they might be playing 50% different songs than on opening night. And after an evening of *complete* performances of great songs, a final medley cramming in even more hits would actually be welcome.

Instead we have this overlong, grudge-settling, Gordy-glorifying musical. It's the B side to the crowd-pleasing jukebox entertainment that might have been.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

*As You Like it (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) *****
*Chimichangas And Zoloft **
*Closer Than Ever ****
*Cock ** 1/2*
*Harvey with Jim Parsons **
*My Children! My Africa! ****
*Once On This Island ****
*Potted Potter **
*Storefront Church ** 1/2*
*Title And Deed ****
*Picture Incomplete (NYMF) ***
*Flambe Dreams (NYMF) ***
*Rio (NYMF) ***
*The Two Month Rule (NYMF) **
*Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2*
*Stealing Time (NYMF) ***
*Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2*
*Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ****
*Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2*
*How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2*
*Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ****
*Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2*
*Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2*
*Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2*
*Living With Henry (NYMF) **
*A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2*
*The Last Smoker In America ***
*Gore Vidal's The Best Man (w new cast) ****
*Into The Woods at Delacorte ** 1/2*
*Bring It On: The Musical ***
*Bullet For Adolf **
*Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc. ***
*Harrison, TX ****
*Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck" (FringeNYC) * 1/2*
*Pink Milk (FringeNYC) * 1/2*
Who Murdered Love (FringeNYC) no stars
*Storytime With Mr. Buttermen (FringeNYC) ***
*#MormonInChief (FringeNYC) ***
*An Interrogation Primer (FringeNYC) ****
*An Evening With Kirk Douglas (FringeNYC) **
*Sheherizade (FringeNYC) ***
*The Great Pie Robbery (FringeNYC) ** 1/2*
*Independents (FringeNYC) *** 1/2*
*The Dick and The Rose (FringeNYC) ***
*Magdalen (FringeNYC) ****
*Bombsheltered (FringeNYC) ** 1/2*
*Paper Plane (FringeNYC) ** 1/2*
*Rated M For Murder (FringeNYC) ** 1/2*
*Mallory/Valerie (FringeNYC) **
*Non-Equity: The Musical! (FringeNYC) **
*Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame (FringeNYC) *** 1/2*
*City Of Shadows (FringeNYC) ****
*Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking ****
*Salamander Starts Over (FringeNYC) ****
*Pieces (FringeNYC) **
*The Train Driver ****
*Chaplin The Musical * 1/2*
*Detroit ** 1/2*
*Heartless at Signature ***

Einstein On The Beach at BAM ****
Red-Handed Otter ** 1/2
Marry Me A Little **
An Enemy Of The People ** 1/2
The Old Man And The Old Moon *** 1/2
A Chorus Line at Papermill ***
Helen & Edgar ***
Grace * 1/2
Cyrano de Bergerac **
Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? ***
Disgraced **
Annie ** 1/2
The Heiress **
Checkers ** 1/2
Ivanov ***
Golden Child at Signature ** 1/2
Giant at the Public *** 1/2
Scandalous * 1/2
Forever Dusty **
The Performers **
The Piano Lesson at Signature *** 1/2
Un Ballo In Maschera at the Met *** 1/2 (singing) * (production) so call it ** 1/2
A Christmas Story: The Musical **
The Sound Of Music at Papermill ***
My Name Is Asher Lev *** 1/2
Golden Boy **
A Civil War Christmas ** 1/2
Dead Accounts **
The Anarchist *
Glengarry Glen Ross **
Bare **
The Mystery Of Edwin Drood ** 1/2
The Great God Pan ** 1/2
The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***

The Flick ***

Detroit '67 ** 1/2

Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)

Hit The Wall *

Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2

The Mound Builders at Signature *

Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2

Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***

The Lying Lesson * 1/2

Hands On A Hardbody *

Kinky Boots **

Matilda The Musical *** 1/2

The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***

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Note: *Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.*

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