

Theater: Not So 'Amazing Grace;' The National Theatre For Student Artists' Road Trip

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AMAZING GRACE * out of ****

EXPEDITION: FROM THE NATIONAL THEATRE FOR STUDENT ARTISTS

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NEDERLANDER THEATRE

God bless the Broadway musical with good intentions. It's tempting to say that a noble purpose does not make for good art. Usually, it's just a bore. Yet, sometimes it strikes a nerve and accomplishes everything its creators might hope: think Uncle Tom's Cabin or the movie Philadelphia or the anti-apartheid single "Sun City." They did indeed succeed in everything but being enduring works of art.

So it's tempting, but wrong to dismiss good intentions. Many works of art have been driven by passionate ideals: Les Miserables, the socially conscious novels of Charles Dickens that spotlighted countless ills, Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska, the play Angels In America. (For all I know, Upton Sinclair's The Jungle is a great read.) One could go on. Perhaps the difference is that at some point for their creators the art became more important than the issue.

In this case, it may not have been ideals so much as the truth: the story of the man who wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace" truly is amazing. John Newton really did sail with his father, did get impressed into the navy, was captured and held as a virtual slave by an African princess who treated him no better than her other slaves, really did marry his childhood sweetheart, really did become born again during a frightening storm on the ocean and really did work avidly towards the abolition of slavery in the UK and the slave trade on the high seas. It's the stuff of high drama indeed.

No wonder Christopher Smith -- a one-time police officer making his professional debut (not to mention his Broadway debut) -- thought, "This should be a musical!" He worked on it for years, co-wrote the book and did the music and lyrics. He has a top-notch team: the talented choreographer Christopher Gattelli did the choreography, Gabriel Barre directs and the cast includes Tom Hewitt, Chuck Cooper and Josh Young of Jesus Christ Superstar as the slave trader turned crusader John Newton. As anyone who has ever struggled to mount a Broadway show knows, that is a monumental accomplishment.

But... and you knew a "but" was coming, it's far from a good show. The tale is stiff and didactic, the songs are unmemorable and one is happy to hear the tune "Amazing Grace" finally sung not for its own merits but because you know it means the show is at an end.

Some of the staging is bizarre, such as the freeze frame conceit during scenes of high drama. And it makes very poor use of the crow's nests on both sides of the stage that evoke ships at sea the entire time. I'm still a fan of the appealing Josh Young (he stole the show at JCS) but with weak material it's no surprise he can't create a compelling character or chart the rather abrupt journey from unrepentant slave trader (about 98% of the show) to born again believer who rejects it (the last 2%). Erin Mackey sings prettily when asked to bring out some operetta-like colors and Harriet D. Foy has some fun with the cartoon character of Princess Peyai, but really

they're all fighting a losing battle.

Real life is naturally more complex and more interesting than the diorama on display here. In real life, Newton had his born again moment on board a ship during a terrible storm just like he does in the show...and as a "devout" Christian continued in the slave trade for years. Even when he retired, Newton invested in and profited from the pitiless business of buying and selling other human beings. It was in fact 40 years after becoming a "real" Christian that Newton finally spoke out publicly against the evils of slavery. That's not a slur on Newton; most people never change.

The show captures such genuine complexity just once. The terrific actor Chuck Cooper has been betrayed by Newton and though our hero has rescued Cooper (from Newton's own perfidy, mind you) Cooper's character refuses to give his forgiveness. Forgiveness is the last thing on his mind, he says bitterly and with feeling. Of course, he really does forgive Newton about two minutes later, but for a brief moment Amazing Grace comes to life as real people tackle the tangled emotions embedded in the legacy of slavery. For a brief moment, it's touched by grace.

EXPEDITION

NATIONAL THEATRE FOR STUDENT ARTISTS

Sometimes, good intentions do create good art.

In the last year or so, I've become more and more aware of the great programs geared towards celebrating and encouraging theater among high school and college students. It's painfully clear that the arts are the first things cut in public schools when budgets are tight, so every little bit helps.

Here's another example: the [National Theatre For Student Artists](#). They're apparently one of the few groups to actually pay students to create a work of art. Hey, that may be confusing since everyone knows actors only make money waiting tables. But it's a great way to level the playing field a little and make sure that the arts aren't available only to kids in wealthy suburbs or those who can afford to pay for theater camp and the like.

I'm looking forward to their latest production. Called [Expedition](#), it takes place July 23-25 at the 4th Street Theatre in New York City.

The storyline pushes a lot of buttons: the tale of a young guy leaving his boyfriend behind when he travels across the country for a new job hits on gender, sexual orientation, class, race, technology and probably a few more I haven't thought of yet.

While I've been pleasantly surprised by the exceptional talent on display in various showcases of young people, it's no slight to say the biggest drama may be taking place backstage. Imagine being a high school or college kid and getting to come to NYC (often for the first time), hang out and put on a show over the summer. And get paid for it. It's truly a life-changing experience. Just seeing where the cast and creative team have come from is exciting: everywhere from Florida to Texas to Indiana to Colorado to Vermont is represented. So check it out: maybe where they and [NTSA](#) are headed will prove just as exciting.

THEATER OF 2015

[Honeymoon In Vegas](#) **

[The Woodsman](#) ***

[Constellations](#) ** 1/2

[Taylor Mac's A 24 Decade History Of Popular Music 1930s-1950s](#) ** 1/2

[Let The Right One In](#) **

Da no rating

[A Month In The Country](#) ** 1/2