

## Sister Act Makes World Premiere in Pasadena

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Published November 9, 2006



In wake of the so-called "Disney revolution" on Broadway, the idea of churning out myriad musicals inspired by Hollywood screen gems is all too common as of late, and this trend is not always welcome in a world of high-cultured art. There was a time when movie moguls came to the New York stage scene to sniff out their next blockbuster, but with million plus budgets now status quo in terms of a musical on Broadway, it is no wonder that new works are abandoned for a built-in audience.

On occasion, however, a movie-inspired musical comes along that seems to gracefully flow onto stage without the awkwardness seen in Disney's latest stage adaptation of Tarzan, which although helmed by Grammy award-winner Phil Collins, was unable to capture the true magic of live theatre. Such seems to be the case with the Pasadena Playhouse's latest offering, Sister Act the Musical, playing through December 17, 2006 before heading to Atlanta and then most likely the Great White Way.



This world premiere of Sister Act the Musical draws from the Touchstone Pictures film of the same name, starring Whoopi Goldberg. Much of the plot remains in tact, with Deloris Van Cartier (Dawnn Lewis), a kitchy lounge singing Tina Turner, running into police protective custody after witnessing a murder at the hands of her gangster boyfriend Curtis Shank (Harrison White). Comedy ensues as Sgt. Eddie Souther (David Jennings) bribes the Holy Order of the Little Sisters of Our Mother of Perpetual Faith to keep Deloris under wraps and under robes as Sister Mary Clarence. Ever the singing star, Deloris uses her God-given talents to transform the nun-filled choir into a funkadelic musical sensation.

Injecting some soul into the holy order does not sit well with the no-nonsense Mother Superior (Elizabeth Ward Land), who makes it her mission to oust Deloris and her evil ways, before realizing the two sisters have slightly more in common than imagined. When Curtis tracks down his diva hiding out as a nun, he releases his goons to silence Deloris for good, without taking into consideration the power of a bunch of the cloistered sisters.

Although perhaps not the most apparent choice for a musical adaptation, in the hands of a Tony, Emmy and Academy award-winning team, Sister Act the Musical bumps and grinds its way into the limelight as a hand clapping and rousing good time.

Stage and film composer Alan Menken heads up the creative team, and is certainly no stranger to screen-to-stage projects, as he and lyricist Howard Ashman gave Disney animation a much needed facelift in the 90's and transferred *Beauty and the Beast* to Broadway 13 years ago. Menken has crafted another sure-fire hit with *Sister Act*, blending the boogielicious disco beats of the 1970's with inspiring melodies of traditional theatre. Joining Menken for this go-around is lyricist Glenn Slater, having worked together on Disney's recent animated Western, *Home on the Range*, and currently collaborating on upcoming Broadway projects including *The Little Mermaid* and *Leap of Faith*.

Ditching the limited songs used on the 1992 film, most of *Sister Act the Musical's* numbers satisfy, including "How I Got the Calling," "Take Me to Heaven" and "Light My Way," while only faltering in Sgt. Souther's number "I Could Be That Guy," which seems labored and tired and never really allows Jennings to shine in his character-defining moment on stage.

Grammy award-winning singer Lewis, making her Playhouse debut, is a recognizable television veteran from *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper*, *Any Day Now* and *A Different World*. She unfortunately struggles at first to find her footing, falling emotionally flat until halfway through the first act. Until that point, she presents a rather uncomfortable look at a woman running scared, never really connecting with the role, although once Lewis gets underway in the guise of Sister Mary Clarence, all is forgiven. Lewis' vocal dexterity is a powerful jolt in the right direction for this singing and dancing extravaganza, and does not fail to keep the energy level high throughout the evening.

With a more traditional stage background, Land, also in her Playhouse debut, plays the role of Mother Superior with a no-nonsense flavor and maintains her knuckle slapping form while hitting the comical marks as the straight man for the evening. Maggie Smith gave a delightfully memorable performance in the film, but Land holds her own and never veers into the realm of comparison. Land has performed on Broadway in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *Passion* and *City of Angels*.

The most hilarious moments ensue at the hands of White, as the Shaft-esque gangsta, adding plenty of flair with his over-the-top performance. In "Dress to Kill," White embodies every thinkable stereotype of a disco-aged pimp, and presents a funky villain necessary in the scheme of the show.

Other notable performances of the evening come from Beth Malone (Sister Mary Robert), having recently made her Broadway debut playing June Carter Cash in the short-lived *Ring of Fire*, Amy K. Murray (Sister Mary Patrick), Melvin Abston (TJ), Dan Domenech (Dinero), Danny Stiles (Bones) and Audrie Neena (Sister Mary Lazarus).

Abston, Domenech and Stiles steal the laughter during a sidesplitting "Lady in the Long Black Dress," each assuming the role of a Damon Runyon mobster to the highest degree. Rounding out the cast is Badia Farha, Wilkie Ferguson, Andi Gibson, Wendy James, Wendy Melkonian, Claci Miller, Patina Renea Miller, Lisa Robinson and Roberta B. Wall.

Lavish colors and extravagant costumes, from Garry Lennon, explode as a delicious retro kaleidoscope on stage, playing up the corny strengths of the disco era. Adding to the evenings' nightclub feel is the shining work of lighting designer Donald Holder, illuminating the stage with a concert-style look. Lacking however is David Potts' scenic design, which at times is too minimalist for its own good.

Emmy and Golden Globe award-winning duo Cheri and Bill Steinkellner have written a commendable book for *Sister Act*, and with the direction of Peter Schneider, former president of animation and chairman of the studio for the Walt Disney Company, this musical, after some fine tuning, is an obvious contender for a spot on Broadway, possibly next season.