

‘A Motown Christmas’ is a holiday gift

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GUEST WRITER

If you find yourself in need of some Christmas Spirit, the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe’s “A Motown Christmas” just might be the ticket.

Conceived and directed by the company’s artistic director, Nate Jacobs, the production features Christmas songs and other favorites recorded on the Motown label as well as traditional holiday tunes. The evening is a celebration of Motown in all its glory: The Supremes, The Temptations, Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder, Martha and the Vandellas, The Jackson 5 and Marvin Gaye.



PHOTO BY DON DALY

MaRah Williams, Mandi Jo John and Ariel Blue.

Audience members are encouraged to sing along, get up and dance with the performers — and sing along they do.

Michael Newton-Brown’s set of gaily-wrapped Christmas presents,

MOTOWN | 5

MOTOWN

FROM PAGE 1

glistening garlands and wreaths provides a festive touch. The moment they take the stage, the cast dives right into dozens of familiar numbers without missing a beat. And what a cast it is.

The women — Ariel Blue, Mandi Jo John and MaRah Williams — give superb renditions of “Heatwave,” “Jimmy Mack,” “Stop! In the Name of Love” and more, leaving audience members dancing in their seats.

The men — Christopher Eisenberg, Nate Jacobs, Michael Mendez, Leon S. Pitts II and Sheldon Rhoden — captivate with a host of Motown favorites including “My Girl,” “Tears of a Clown” and “Can’t Help Myself.”

Finally, it is time for the Christmas music — first the old-fashioned fun favorites, including “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus,” “Jingle Bells” and “Jingle Bell Rock.”

“Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” features talented dancers Derric Gobourne Jr. and Joshua Thompson, whose moves are both fluid and frenetic. They are perfectly hilarious as reindeer.

The second act focuses on religious Christmas carols — the beautiful “We Rejoice,” written by Jacobs, as well as more traditional pieces including “Little Drummer Boy,” “Silent Night,” “Mary Did You Know,” “Bless This House,” and “Little Bright Star.”

A spirited and emotional finale, “Go Tell It on the Mountain”/“Ain’t No Mountain High Enough,” calls for peace on earth, bringing the audience to its feet.

Choreographed by Donald Frison, the cast performs all the moves for which Motown is famous with aplomb.

Costumes by Cristy Owen are just right for the period and with some added glitz for the holidays.

The women’s hair-dos and makeup are spot on.

The band, under the direction of James E. Dodge II, provides the music, with JL Cash Jr. on auxiliary keys, Todd Bellamy on piano, Willie Thompson on guitar and Sheldon Graham on drums.

“A Motown Christmas” runs through Dec. 31 with a special New Year’s Eve spectacular, complete with party hats, light bites, champagne and dancing after the final performance.

The theater is located at 1646 10th Way (off Orange, north of 10th St.), Sarasota. For more information and reservations, call 941-366-1505, ext. 106.



Michael Mendez, left, Leon S. Pitts II, Christopher Eisenberg (front), Sheldon Rhoden, and Nate Jacobs.

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