

News

‘The Black Nativity’ Continues Run at Greater St. Stephens Missionary Baptist Church

By *The Skanner News*

It isn't often when actors for a Christmas-themed play describe a rehearsal as "having church." But there's not much that is typical about the limited run of *Black Nativity*, a soul-stirring, foot-tapping, Gospel-singing good time, based on a musical written by Harlem Renaissance poet and playwright Langston Hughes.

"This is a piece of heaven right here," said Richard Greer, 59, who said he has been singing since he was a teenager. "It's the actual grassroots part of where the black spiritual music really comes from. The actual essence of what it is."

During its two-weekend run, which opened Dec. 11, the play uses a cultural lens to retell the Biblical story of the birth of Jesus Christ, using scripture, interpretive dance, and lots of singing. Unlike most theatrical productions, the musical:

- Will be performed in a small church on Mallory Avenue.
- Features a cast of ten singers, one narrator, Mary and Joseph.
- Highlights choir members from predominantly black churches in Portland.

"When it comes to gospel and spirituals, that's something inherited from our ancestors," said Jerry Foster, who directs the play. "It's a cultural thing."

Black Nativity is produced by PassinArt: A Theatre Company, the longest-running black theater company in Portland. When Foster was trying to cast the play, he reached out to musicians he knew at three churches: Highland Christian Center, Emmanuel Temple Full Gospel Pentecostal Church and St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church.

"You can teach someone who can sing

to act, but you can't teach an actor to sing," Foster explained. "That's a big difference."

Tanetta Martin, 46, said she was asked to participate in *Black Nativity* by her church's musical director, who also brought along a few additional members of the church's praise team.

"I've been singing all my life," said Martin, whose only previous theatrical experience was a small part in a church play. "I don't consider myself a professional. I'm a worshipper."

At a recent rehearsal, performers straggled in from other church-based rehearsals and singing commitments. Greer warmed up by singing as he paced the sidewalk outside the church. Inside, Foster was anxious to begin. He had emailed each of the singers the words

tin, who advised: "Let's pray."

The cast of the holiday musical stood among the pews and held hands as

through."

This year's production is the fourth time in 20 years that PassinArt has offered *Black Nativity* as part of its season. From now on, the company would like to mount it as an annual holiday tradition, as it is done in other cities, such as Boston, Atlanta and Seattle. Foster noted that audience members of all walks of life, whether of faith or not will, enjoy this performance. "It's a play for everybody because the basic foundation is the music."

This is the final weekend of the play's run. On Dec. 18 and 19 the play runs at 7:30 p.m. and on Sunday it starts at 3 p.m. All performances are at the Greater St. Stephens Missionary Baptist Church, 3605 NE Mallory Ave.

Admission is \$20 in advance. The group rate ticket is \$15 per ticket for purchases of 10 or more tickets. There is no charge charge for children 5 and under, and the charge for children up to age 12 is \$5 at the door.

Tickets are available online at www.passinart.net or through JP's Custom Picture Framing & Gallery, 418 NE Killingsworth, (503) 288-2118, or Elevated Coffee, 5261 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd., (971) 255-1296.



"Black Nativity," a play based on a musical written by poet and playwright Langston Hughes, concludes its run this weekend at Greater St. Stephens Missionary Baptist Church, 3605 NE Mallory Ave. Performances start at 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday and at 3 p.m. Sunday. Pictured here, from left to right, starting with the back row: Alea Johnson, Quantae L. Cole, Richard Greer, Elliott Young, Tanetta Martin and Coco Jackson. Middle row: Dee-Dee Gipson (left), Deanna Johnson and Haneefah Dudley. Front row: Shelley B. Shelley (left), Robert Hall.

“These are the songs that really touched people’s souls and they gave God praise and they trusted him, no matter what they were going through

to a new song and it was time to see how they sounded.

"Do you know the rhythm," Foster asked. "Let's get up and let's work."

He was promptly corrected by Mar-

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