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By JAMES W. WADE III
Staff Reporter

If you like good gospel singing, you have to see “Black Nativity” at the Karamu House Theater. This gospel Christmas celebration by Langston Hughes has dazzled people for over a quarter century making it one of the theaters most supported productions.

It was conceived by Hughes in 1961 and presents the story of Jesus’ birth. With the story, comes great dancing such as Robby Cecil and Ni’Keisha Kelly who portrays Joseph and Mary as they attempt to find a room at the inn.

The show uses scripture, verse, music and dance to tell the original story of the nativity. Based on the Gospel of St. Luke, combined with the poetry of Hughes, this song/play touches a special chord in the hearts of all.

Richard H. Morris Jr. (who doubles as set and lighting designer) has focused more on singing and interpretative dance, with the entire second act presented as a concert of tribute. And, the result is a production that sizzles with passion and pulsating devotion.

Joyce Meadows narrates the production and is the only woman who has done so thus far. Dressed in biblical day’s attire, the cast portrayed scenes and made them seem so real.

The dancers twirled around and leaped on the stage with such grace.

Glenn Brackens is the music director and drives that church flavor on such songs as “All Souled Out” and “I Love the Lord.”

Such veteran singers/actors, such as Eva Blount and Syrmylin Cartwright-Kelly, have that special way of making their characters the shining star.

Brackens is assisted by Kyle Turner on drums and Hosea “thumpin” Harris, who plays the bass and keyboards on a few selections.

One of the singers B. Durand Ferebee Jr., in his second year, took you up high on the level of Phillip Bailey as he comes out singing the Clark Sisters rendition “Praying Spirit” with the trio Susan Hughes, Eva Blount and Joyce Linzy.

Ferebee is the son of the dynamic singing Praise leader Sharlyn Ferbee and Benarr Ferbee, both gifted and anointed.

When Jesus is born, the production takes off with such selections as “Go Tell It on the Mountain” and “O Holy Night.”

If you are still sitting in your seat, then you will enjoy the ending of Act I as they close out singing Richard Smallwood’s “Total Praise.”

Another highlight, each year in the production, Karamu House recognizes a few people. This year the honorees are the Reverend Paul Sadler Sr. and Professor James W. Wade II. Sadler will be honored at the Dec 29th show at 8 p.m.

Wade was honored at the Saturday December 18, show in grand style.

Wade, a talented musician who started playing at a very young age, has ruled the Hammond B3 organ which could be heard for many years at the Temple Baptist Church located at 7500 Cedar Avenue.

He dedicated his life playing only gospel music and has played with numerous of singers and musicians, both nationally and locally. Wade currently plays for Imani Temple Ministries, Reverend Rodney Thomas is pastor.

As the second Act opens, the singers wearing choir robes come down the aisles to the stage and seem to have a conversation about how good God is. Glenn Burchette leads the company in a rousing take of “God Favored Me.”

The songs are sung with such vibrant as they change and come back in their church clothes to end the play singing “God be with You.”

This all star cast deserves two thumbs up for a great performance.

The ensemble that makes up the cast is Denny Avehart, Eva Blount, Glenn Burchette, Ronall Burston, Syrmylin Cartwright-Kelly, B. Durand Ferebee Jr., Michelle Wilkerson Guerry, Susan Hughes, Keith Jacobs, Christina Johnson, Joyce Linzy, Joyce Meadows, Miguel Osborne, James Smith, and Kenesha Terrell.

The dancers are Ni’Keisha Kelly, Robby Cecil, Canaan Parrott, Jala Khateeb, Candice Murray, Christina Thigpen-Pinkard, Imani Thomas, and Darnell Weaver.

This must see production of “Black Nativity” runs through December 30, 2010.

Karamu House, located in Cleveland’s Fairfax neighborhood , is the oldest African-American theater in the United States. Founded in 1915, it has been the launching site for such diverse actors and playwrights as Langston Hughes, Ruby Dee, Robert Guillaume, and countless others. In addition to its theater, Karamu runs a day care facility and cultural arts classes for all age groups.