

THEATER REVIEW | Musical Theater Heritage's

'A Spectacular Christmas'

ROBERT TRUSSELL



RTRUSSELL@KCSTAR.COM

Not all holiday shows are created equal, and to support that assertion I direct your attention to "A Spectacular Christmas in Concert" at the Off Center Theatre.

The annual holiday show from Musical Theater Heritage offers exceptional musicianship, so much so that the event transcends the prosaic nature of the presentation. Nobody gets writing credit for this show and at times it's a bit of a slog as we work our way through the history of holiday pop music in the 20th century. You know what I mean: "And then, in 1945, Gene Autry recorded 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,'" etc.

Nonetheless, much of the information imparted from the stage is inherently interesting. Many of our most popular holiday tunes happened to have been written by Jewish songwriters, for example, and most of the enduring Christmas songs were written expressly to be commercial hits.

What sets this show apart is the quality of the voices and the complex harmonies crafted by artistic director Sarah Crawford. The show has two of the best female singers in Kansas City -- Lauren Braton and Malena Marcase -- and a talented ensemble that includes Samantha Barboza, Grant Golson and Richard Gibson.

Jeremy Watson brings his trademark enthusiasm to the piano and occasional vocals -- he tears it up on "Run Run Rudolph" -- and a children's chorus brings four talented kids to the stage. Brendan Hulla and siblings Alec, Willa and Wyatt Walberg make every second of stage time count.

Most of the secular selections are obligatory. What would a holiday show be without



MANON LEE

Pictured: Richard Gibson, Lauren Braton, Jeremy Watson (piano), Samantha Barboza, Grant Golson

"Sleigh Ride," "Carol of the Bells" and the dreaded "White Christmas?" Despite the stultifying familiarity of some of this music, Watson and the cast deliver the tunes with style. And some are pleasant surprises, such as Hulla's affecting performance of "Walking in the Air."

The show gets some laughs, first by observing the absence of the traditional host of the MTH holiday production, George Harter. Harter, as it turned out, was in London with a theater tour, but the cast has some fun pretending to read the script Harter would have read had he been on stage. The first appearance of the kids' chorus is amusing, as they take the stage singing the incongruous "This is Halloween" because, as one of them points out, Crawford hired them back in October.

Act II includes the reading of three holiday letters from American veterans, including one who served in World War II and another who fought in Vietnam. The third, written during Operation Desert Storm, is read by Gibson, who also happens to its author. Gibson, by the

way, is a terrific bass.

Despite the over-abundance of scripted banter and clunky musical history, there are moments of pure spiritual transcendence. Braton, drawing on her operatic training, performs an arresting candlelight rendition of "Personent Hodie," a Latin carol, in which the power of her voice stops time.

And the show closes with soulful song the company first performed in last year's holiday show, "We Are Not Alone." With Marcase's crystalline soprano commanding our attention and the rest of the cast repeating the deceptively simple message of the title, the effect is profound.

It does what theater is supposed to do, at least part of the time. It sends us home reflecting on the meaning of our lives and the staggering beauty that only the human voice can create.

To reach Robert Trussell, theater critic, call 816-234-4765 or send email to rtrussell@kstar.com.

ONSTAGE

'A Spectacular Christmas' runs through December 18 at the Off Center Theatre at Crown Center. Call 816-842-9999 or go to www.mthkc.com

