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Blues in the Night Dazzles at the Wallis

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, May 9th, 2018



The stellar cast of *Blues in the Night* at the Wallis Center for the Performing Arts. If you're looking for a scintillating way to spend a night at the theatre and be dazzled by the talents of a trio of women (and the cad who pushed them over the edge) breathing new life into classic blues standards, look no further than the sublime revival of *Blues in the Night* playing now through May 20th at The Wallis Center for the Performing Arts in the heart of Beverly Hills. This latest revival features a trio of sensuous, soulful women billed in the program as The Lady from the Road (Yvette Cason), The Girl with a Date (Bryce Charles), and The Woman of the World (Paulette Ivory) who deliver a no-holds barred, tour-de-force performance of 26 (count them, 26) blues staples, some familiar, some not-so-familiar with a capable assist from The Man in the Saloon (Chester Gregory) who, as the lone man in this revue, is the source and the target of their heartache and scorn. Conceived and directed by Sheldon Epps, the material was expertly apportioned between the three women allowing each to shine individually as well as together, at times in duet, and other times in three-part harmony on brilliant display in the ferocious and fierce "Take It Right Back" at the end of the first act.

This intimate 150-seat theater was the perfect venue to appreciate the talents of these exceptional performers backed by a superb 5-piece band. The stage design of a moody noir hotel showcases the women in a simple yet evocative environs, each in their respective hotel room, often in various states of undress as they slink and smolder and bare their souls.

The show, clocking in at 2 hours (including a 15 minute intermission), whizzed by at a brisk pace as the performers seamlessly segued from one number to the next. Mr. Epps has curated an extraordinary compendium of songs, woven together with a sliver of narrative thread which draws us into these characters' lives and transports us back in time to the '20s and '30s with such stalwarts as "Stomping at the Savoy," "Taking a Chance on Love," "Lover Man," "Lush Life" and "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" as well as a string of lesser known but truly worthy gems. There are plenty of standouts, including Paulette Ivory's mildly raunchy "Kitchen Man" brimming with innuendo and Bryce Charles' plaintive delivery of "Willow Weep for Me," but Yvette Cason's turn as the world-weary and wise Lady from the Road who cut her teeth working the Chitlin' Circuit steals the show (armed with a parasol as her multipurpose prop) with

her spot-on comedic delivery of the saucy standout “Take me for a Buggy Ride.” And while there is much to praise in Mr. Gregory’s performance, I couldn’t help wondering if casting a slicker, more caddish cad in the role might have lent a more convincing counterpoint to the women’s songs of lament.



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At intermission, I couldn’t help overhearing a woman behind me sharing her reaction to the show in the context of the #MeToo movement. She took issue with the notion of celebrating songs of women pining for the men who done them wrong. She felt that we should be “beyond that” stereotype. I couldn’t resist the opportunity to chime in on their conversation. Isn’t this, after all, what live theatre is about? Bringing people together to experience something that starts a dialogue and often elicits different reactions depending on the beholder’s perspective. I commended the woman for making a valid point, but asked (rhetorically) if it’s really fair to hold these songs to today’s standards. I suggested that perhaps these songs are best appreciated (or not) as a time capsule of sorts. Mr. Epps himself comments on this topic directly in the program’s Q&A, offering that “it’s always been a show about female empowerment” and I’d have to agree with him.

The second act was equally enthralling as the company breezed through 11 songs, cementing my respect for these seasoned performers as they tackled songs like “Wasted Life Blues” and “I Got a Right to Sing the Blues” with abandon. With a catalogue of songs forged by the likes of Bessie Smith, Harold Arlen and Duke Ellington (among others), these are big shoes to fill, but this company rises to the task, leaving it all on the stage. By the end of the show, when the actors took their bows, the audience applause seemed to confirm my feeling with the applause steadily growing, culminating in the rousing ovation as Yvette Cason took the stage. But it was the sum of the parts (actors and band) that won over the audience and brought them to their feet for a final encore performance, serving as a perfect nightcap to a remarkable piece of entertainment.

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