Cultural Daily

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Book of Mormon, fun and filthy as ever

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, February 26th, 2020

The Book of Mormon is back, now more irreverently relevant than ever. In America's Twilight Zone age of religion and politics—where a GOP-backed porn star president touts his "family values" while a gay candidate challenges him—the musical's existential message is a must-see, even if you've seen it before.

Winner of nine Tony Awards, *The Book of Mormon* plays through March 29 at the Ahmanson Theatre. Book, music and lyrics are by Trey Parker, Robert Lopez and Matt Stone.

The show's existential message? On this essentially meaningless planet, we're all just making stuff up (maybe our President is some disguised Zen master in that regard—okay, I doubt it). So why not enjoy that artifice? And yes, according to Mormon doctrine, true believers are assigned to an after-life planet all their own to keep their fictional storylines going for eternity.

Liam Tobin in *The Book of Mormon*. Photo by Julieta Cervantes.

The plot

Back on earth, the show's plot unspools. Elder Price, a square-jawed All-American Mormon (Liam Tobin), prays to be sent to "Planet Orlando" (it's on Earth, in Florida). He's about to embark on his mission, a two-year proselytizing journey that young Mormons—dressed in those snappy white shirts and black ties—conduct two-by-two, often in faraway lands.

Elder Price's dream of visiting the Magic Kingdom is put on hold. The slovenly partner he's assigned to, Elder Cunningham (Jordan Matthew Brown), is a stumbling dork with a penchant for fibbing. While the pair's friends are sent to France and Italy, these mismatched missionaries are sent to Uganda.

Jordan Matthew Brown in *The Book of Mormon*. Photo by Julieta Cervantes.

Odd couple Price and Cunningham face challenges after being tossed into an unfamiliar land—two enduring theatrical plots that the production thoroughly milks.

A Mormon parody

First staged in 2011, *The Book of Mormon* largely parodies beliefs held by the Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-day Saints, with a redemptive message tossed in: when community members band together, feel-good good-will fun results. Yes—in a way that takes us back to religion, but in this show, it includes a decidedly wry twist.

As a theatergoer said to me: “religion could be such a connective, wonderful thing without all that bull.” In the end, that’s essentially what *Book of Mormon* delivers.

The company of *The Book of Mormon*. Photo by Julieta Cervantes.

As the show progresses, Uganda villagers (riddled by AIDS and other woes) grow weary of worn Mormon doctrine delivered by a bunch of perky 19-year-old lily-white man-boys, led by Cunningham. So, Cunningham just starts—that’s right—making stuff up. He tosses an array of science fiction plots and characters into staid Mormon teachings. They include hobbits, Darth Vader and Lt. Uhura from the late 1960s series, Star Trek.

A sacred-profane tightrope

Expletive-driven with more than one simulated sex act, the show has lots of fun up-ending sacred Mormon altars, while in a sly way, honoring them. The production balances on a sacred-profane tightrope as it walks (and marvelously dances) its way across a theological landscape.

Actually, the irreverent production tumbles off that tightrope, plummeting into a riotous pit of mockery. That’s also the point. (After all, Trey Parker and Matt Stone are the creators of television’s *South Park*.)

Alyah Chanelle Scott and Jordan Matthew Brown in *The Book of Mormon*. Photo by Julieta Cervantes.

As Elder Price, Liam Tobin gave a stellar over-the-top performance, rendering the character’s Jupiter-sized ego with the right amount of earnest notes—his kicky asides were brilliant. The actor delivered a powerhouse rendition of the song, “I Believe.”

Jordan Matthew Brown’s interpretation of Elder Cunningham lent the character new heights – he’s a terrific body comic. Who are his mentors? I’d like to know. He’s done them damn proud.

Jordan Matthew Brown, Alyah Chanelle Scott and Liam Tobin in *The Book of Mormon*. Photo by Julieta Cervantes.

Showstopper tunes

As Nabulungi—the Uganda Village girl who dreams of Paradise (also known as Salt Lake City)—Alyah Chanelle Scott infused the role with gravitas veering it away from a one-dimensional portrayal, especially during Act 1. Her rendition of the song, “Sal Tlay Ka Siti” was the perfect pause amid the production’s non-stop showstopper tunes. Jacques C. Smith as Mafala Hatimbi matched her pitch-perfect performance, adding his brand of street-smarts.

The perennial audience favorite “Turn it Off” was flawless (in the song, missionaries demonstrate a nifty trick that negates pesky emotions). Andy Huntington Jones (Elder McKinley), headlines

that song, along with “I Am Africa.” Jones gave a hilarious performance as a tortured repressed (and yet oh-so eager) gay Mormon.

Alyah Chanelle Scott in *The Book of Mormon*. Photo by Julieta Cervantes.

When Mormons dream of hell

The song, “Spooky Mormon Hell Dream” (Price and company) and “Joseph Smith American Moses” (Nabulungi, Mafala and Ugandans) were nothing short of delicious. All the numbers, in fact, were standouts. In this show expertly cast by Carrie Gardner, there are no weak links.

Casey Nicholaw’s choreography was appropriately perky and marvelously twisted. Direction is by Nicholaw and Trey Parker.

The company of “The Book of Mormon.” Photo by Julieta Cervantes.

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The Ahmanson recently announced its 2020/21 season that includes the eight-time Tony Award-winning musical *Hadestown* along with *Les Miserables*. Plays include Aaron Sorkin’s new production based on Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the National Theatre’s *The Lehman Trilogy*.

Season tickets are available.

Pre-show lottery tickets priced at $25 are available for each performance of *The Book of Mormon*. Entries are accepted at the box office beginning two-and-a-half hours prior to each performance. Two hours prior to each show, names are drawn for a limited number of the tickets.

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