



FRIDAY, MARCH 29, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: A Too-Proud "Ain't Too Proud"

AIN'T TOO PROUD ** out of ****
IMPERIAL THEATRE

OK, enough bitching and moaning about jukebox musicals and revues. They can be great (*Jersey Boys*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Side By Side By Sondheim*), they can be good (*Beautiful*) and as we've learned time and time again, they can be terrible.

Instead, here's a cautionary note about making bio-musicals when the people involved are still alive. I know, I know. I just listed some shows about people who are still alive and those came off just fine. But more often you end up with *Motown*, a sanitized and duller-than-dull waste of talent. Or you get *The Otis Williams Story*, aka *Ain't Too Proud*, a celebration of one of the greatest groups in music history via a musical so detailed, so exhaustive, so dreadfully comprehensive that by the end you'll swear you've seen the hiring and firing of every one of the two dozen men who've been in The Temptations, including their exit interviews with HR.

What a shame, since you'll find so much talent on stage singing so many great songs...albeit songs that are almost never performed from start to finish. It's like spinning a radio dial. Time and time again you hear a song you'd love to listen to but the damn dial keeps spinning. The Temptations and Motown deserve much better and a few decades from now someone will do it right.

The story is sadly unsurprising. A rough life on the streets, an escape via music, fame and fortune thanks to innate talent and the star-making machinery of Motown...and then the fallout from drugs and pressure and abusive childhoods that didn't prepare some of these men for any life, much less a successful one.

More than most pop groups (but not so uncommon in long-running gospel and world music acts like the Blind Boys Of Alabama and



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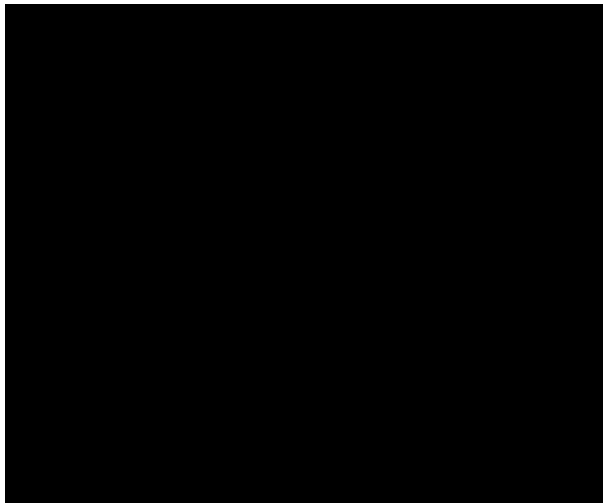
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Ladysmith Black Mambazo), members of the Temptations come and go with surprising regularity. Indispensable lead singers are dispensed with, new lead singers can also be replaced and the whole is most definitely greater than the sum of its parts. It's a whirlwind of excitement and plot developments -- and thoroughly dull. *Ain't Too Proud* feels like one long montage, like a way-too-long introduction for a band's induction into the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame. Thank God the snatches of music keep you from losing faith.

The exceptional playwright Dominique Morisseau wrote the book and I'm assuming she never had the creative control needed to dramatize this story. Indeed, almost none of this story is dramatized. Eighty percent of the time, original Temp Otis Williams (and the author of the book the show is based on) simply steps to the front of the stage and narrates the action. It's deadly dull and you can imagine Morisseau's heart sinking as this became the dominant way of moving the show forward.



But there's always the music, right? Barely. As with the musical *Motown*, song after song is snipped or tossed into a medley or interrupted or simply put in an absurd context that denudes it of all impact. The first act is almost over before a single song is performed from start to finish. The choreography by Sergio Trujillo combines the classic moves of the band with the demands of the show nicely enough. But they strike the classic Temptations pose (hands behind the back at the end of a song) so many times that it loses all power. As with the desire to shove in pieces of so many tunes, more is most definitely less.

Direct Des McAnuff is definitely off his game, with the constant nods to a cinematic flow leaving any emotion far behind. In one scene Otis meets a girl and two seconds later they're married and he's on the road. It's hard to feel any emotional investment in the mismatched couple especially since the first chance we get to catch our breath and see them together again is when they're breaking up. Ditto the

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addiction travails of singer Paul Williams. In one scene we suddenly see Otis referencing Paul as drinking heavily (it's news to us). About sixty seconds later he's fall-down drunk on-stage and then out of the group. Weirdly, a free-basing scene is played partially for laughs. (And who freebases with a bong?)

Act two is so chock full of funerals and goodbyes it's almost satirical and has all the dramatic impact of CliffNotes. We experience virtually nothing in the entire show: we're simply told about it. Countless other choices feel wrong, such as adding women to the lineup of The Temptations at the grand finale, doing the steps alongside the guys. I get it, the women have secondary roles in this story and it's a shame not to showcase them whenever possible. But The Temptations are a band of brothers and their cultural importance is bound up in that image of proud black men sharing a stage. It makes no more sense to throw women into the mix than it would to have men shimmy alongside the Supremes at the finale of *their* story.

The worst part of *Ain't Too Proud* may be how good the cast is that they assembled and then wasted. Derrick Baskin has the role of a lifetime as Otis and stays appropriately unassuming despite spending most of the show in the spotlight. Ephraim Sykes and Saint Aubyn are the ferocious lead singers David Ruffin and Dennis Edwards. Their scene at a concert where Sykes as Ruffin jumps up onstage to reclaim the spotlight is hilarious and just one example of how good their voices are. They both nod to the great singers they're playing without falling into mimicry. Melvin Franklin is an amiable presence in character and a key voice in performance as the bass singer Melvin Franklin. And the sexy, silky-voiced Jeremy Pope as the argumentative Eddie Kendricks just proves what was obvious with his Broadway debut a few months ago in *Choir Boy*: he's a star.

My guest is a sharp-eared musical expert and Broadway fan, but the music in the show was so muffled throughout he wondered how much was canned. Similarly, I felt the sound design by Steve Canyon Kennedy was off because to me at times the vocalists seemed faint and far away, overwhelmed by the music -- canned or not. But no! At the last second, a curtain is raised and an 18-strong orchestra is revealed, sounding fuller and richer than they have all night. The stage is jammed with the cast, the audience explodes with pleasure and for a minute or two as they trade off vocals on "Cloud Nine," that's exactly where we are. Why did they wait till the very end to take us there?

NOTE TO THE FUTURE: When you tackle the Temptations story again, just tell one slice. Me, I'd focus in on their transition from Motown's biggest male group (sorry, Otis; no one was bigger or more important than the Supremes) to one with a social consciousness. You'll have the battle royale between Smokey Robinson and Norman Whitfield. You'll have the band pulled kicking and screaming into Whitfield's psychedelic era. That producer kept them relevant and cool for generations to come when they were just about to become

yesterday's news, but they hated it, at first. Sure, the show devotes a good ten minutes to this, but it's wrapped up in a bland pro forma "scene where we hear about the assassination of MLK" and "scene with footage from Vietnam," which does the show and the story no favor. You'd find a lot more drama in that behind the scenes fight than in watching them quite naturally be devastated over the death of Dr. King. Despite what amounts to a cameo for Smokey, he was really the sixth Temptation. The band was his baby almost as much as his own group the Miracles. Watching them evolve from "My Girl" to epics like "Papa Was A Rolling Stone" and hard-hitting tunes like "Message From A Black Man," "Slave" and "You Make Your Own Heaven and Hell Right Here On Earth" would be thrilling. You'd go from sweet classics like "Since I Lost My Baby" and "The Way You Do The Things You Do" to genuinely funky 70s gems like the above. You'd get the bitter and the sweet. And you'd play the songs from start to finish. Need to brush up on their psychedelic era? [I've got just the playlist for you.](#)

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