



**StarTribune 'Nativity' muted by still full of grace.
(FREETIME)(Review)**

Article from: [Star Tribune \(Minneapolis, MN\)](#) Article date: [December 17, 1999](#)

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1/3 One of the most enduring messages from the story of Jesus is that grace, even redemption, can come in the humblest, most unexpected packaging.

And Penumbra Theatre Company's "Black Nativity," presented simply, is a case in point.

Though not a divine thing in itself, the gospel musical, which opened Tuesday at St. Paul's Fitzgerald Theater, finds strength in humility.

This muted "Nativity" has earth-colored props and costumes, a set that resembles a rustic wood-paneled church, and simple boxes as props. But in verve and spirit, this 13th installment of "Nativity" delivers with grace.

Set in Joplin, Mo., not long after slavery, "Nativity" tells the story of the first free Christmas for a group of ex-slaves. The show, originally by Langston Hughes, is a holy-rolling celebration both of the birth of Jesus and of freedom.

Director Lewis Whitlock III and music director Marcus Walker opt for simplicity over all else, focusing on movement and music that works its effects not by wowing magic so much as by steady building. Songs follow dance, then back to song as Djola Branner, the narrator, preaches and sings. The production also employs African dance and snippets of ballet.

If this "Nativity" seems less effusive than last year's, it's partly because on opening night it took a while to build the show's energy - with the ensemble members obviously trying to engage an audience that was more into being hands-off spectators than hand-clapping participants. But once cast members warmed to the challenge, they won out.

"Nativity" always has been a celebration of African-American music, with strains of blues woven into call-and-response, gospel and jubilee shouts.

What's striking in this show is how alive the ensemble makes the songs and dances feel - even if Whitlock's direction seems stiff.

Branner carries the show on his shoulders and with his big voice. He has a muscular but not imposing presence, at once generous, gentle and firm. Branner fills the theater (and the show) with a hearty and grateful energy.

Bel canto singer Kamal Scott seems to be from another world, singing in a quavering falsetto that harkens to a kind of purity and innocence, but also to the early days of radio. There are also sweet vocal turns by singers Dara Ceaser, Patrick Moore, Brian Williams, Deidrea Whitlock and Kathryn Gagnon.

And quiet as it's kept, the dancers - Wendy Brown and Stephen Reynolds - bring a sexiness to the show, not simply because they have gorgeous bodies but also because their movements suggest sensual engagement.

"Nativity" picks up on another message from the Jesus story. The show's songs use the present tense to suggest that the story of Jesus is not history so much as something continually happening, with stirring performances of titles such as "Christ Is Born" and "Jesus is a Rock." At the end of the evening, the show itself continues to exist in the present tense.

BLACK NATIVITY

- Who: By Langston Hughes. Adapted by Lewis Whitlock III. Produced by Penumbra Theatre.

- Where: Fitzgerald Theater, E. 10th and Exchange Sts., St. Paul.

- When: 8 p.m. today-Sat.; 2 & 7:30 p.m. Sun. and Wed.-Thu.; 7:30 p.m. Tue., Thru Dec. 26. No shows Monday or Christmas Day.

- Review: A more muted show than last year's, this "Nativity" takes its cue from the story of Jesus, delivering grace in simple, humble packaging.

- Tickets: \$13-\$30. Tickets: 612-673-0404. Information: 651-290-1221.

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