



REVIEW: Gospel musical builds up for revelations

By **Mark Hughes Cobb / Staff Writer**

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Theater-lovers might approach a show something like a religious experience: Gathering in rows at a set time, colored lights streaming down, focusing on stories intended to pursue deeper meaning, often underscored by music.

Modern churches have learned from theater, bringing in contemporary performances, high-tech lighting and sound. Dynamic preachers can work up a sweat in a 20-pew country chapel, or be miked and projected like rock stars, for thousands in an arena-sized cathedral.

Theatre Tuscaloosa's current musical melds those worlds. Regina Taylor's "Crowns" speaks directly to audiences, taking the form of sermons and lessons, while letting light in through comic interludes, and rousing, romping, soul-stirring music. Taylor, inspired by Michael Cunningham's book "Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats," wrote vignettes illustrating the cultural significance for the six women sporting chapeau, certainly for church, but also for flirting, status-signaling, and overall morale-lifting.

There's a thin through-line to follow with Yolanda, a young adult woman reluctantly moving in with her grandmother in South Carolina, after her big brother is shot to death. From her perspective, leaving Chicago behind means saying goodbye to free-wheeling life, plunging into a deep South where she has to start nearly from scratch learning societal rules. Mother Shaw (NorQuina "Q" Rieves) assumes the lead instructor role, wise but firm as the matriarch and grande dame. She reels in friends and fellow church-women Mabel, a warm, glowing Kenyatta "Ya Ya" Browne; the more somber Velma, played with quiet, compelling dignity by Dorcas

“DC” Britford; the sass-queen Jeanette, hip-thrust and eye-rolled by Crystal Lassiter; and sisterly Wanda, essayed with great comic timing from Catherine Doughty-Walker, herself also the granddaughter of a “hat queen.”

Not certain if there’s an exact standard required to become an official queen, but characters throughout speak of owning 100, 200 hats or more. The numbers alone indicate devotion. Some of the show’s biggest laughs derive from the consternation of various men, fathers, grandfathers, husbands, preachers — all played to the rafters with joyous gusto by LaBorn Brown — who just can’t get why someone would need so many hats for just one head.

But the ladies lay it out. There are rules. There’s “hattitude.” There are church hats, flirting hats, going to town hats; hats as decor, hats as celebration, hats as reverent covering. Sometimes they reveal; sometimes conceal. As one notes, the Christian Bible says a woman should cover her head, and adorn her hair. Flair is in the Bible: hats as crowning glory.

While it’s mostly images, slices of life, pictures of people we know — neighbors, friends, co-workers — or perhaps are, “Crowns” also builds to revelations. Mother Shaw helps Yolanda connect the fashion, and the music — most of it existing hymns or gospel numbers, flavored with R&B and driving pop — back to the African diaspora. African and African-American are different, Yolanda understands, but connections run deep: “Adorning the head is one of those things ... we just know inside that we’re queens. And these are the crowns we wear.”

With nimble assistance from second-grader Zöe Lassiter as the echo and image of earlier selves, the man and women of “Crowns” create an infectious, exuberant romp and roll seasoned with laughter, tears and laughter-through-tears. Director and choreographer Mark B. Moore deals with what could be potentially static — narration — by keeping his cast in play, mimicry and doubling for emphasis. And when the beat drops on “In the Morning” or “Wade in the Water,” the church-like stage — designed and lit by Richard Dunham for bronzed

warmth — the roof raises. Musical director Luvada Harrison seeks out the best in each, pushing to the heights Britford on “This Joy,” or Brown on “Take My Life and Let It Be,” while bringing together in rich harmony those combined voices, sounding like a five-times-its-size choir.

Theatre Tuscaloosa’s resident costumer Jeanette Waterman shares hat, makeup and costume design for this one with Lois Hughes, a graduate of New York City’s Fashion Institute of Technology who’s worked in European fashion houses, and has been volunteering with the company since 2008. Together they’ve cooked up a cornucopia fit to top royalty, a profusion of colors and fabrics and feathers scattered across the stage like stars burning through the night, turning the church-theater into an eclectic milliner’s shop.

Just as one doesn’t have to be African-American to feel at one with the tales of “Crowns,” nor Christian to experience the jubilance and exhilaration of the music, you don’t have to approach this show with any understanding of, nor even appreciation for, fashion and accessories. The cast and crew extend hands across the pews. The dawning will come to you.

“Crowns” will be performed twice more, at 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, in Theatre Tuscaloosa’s Bean-Brown Theatre, at Shelton State Community College. Tickets are \$24 general; \$20 for seniors, Shelton State employees, and members of the military; and \$16 for students and children. For more, call 391-2277 or see www.theatretusc.com.

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