



LATTER-DAY SAINT OF LAUGHS: Andrew Rannells (center) & the cast of the hilarious *The Book of Mormon*. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

The Book of Mormon

will convert you



THE BOOK OF MORMON

Book, music, and lyrics by Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, & Matt Stone

Directed by Casey Nicholaw & Trey Parker

Choreographed by Casey Nicholaw

Eugene O'Neill Theatre

230 West 49th Street

(212-239-6200), www.BookofMormonBroadway.com

By Scott Harrah

Hallelujah! *The Book of Mormon* is the funniest religious spoof since *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and *Monty Python's Life of Brian* had both Protestants and Catholics alike outraged that Christianity had been lampooned. However, what sets *The Book of Mormon* apart from the Monty Python film classics of Christian raillery is its ability to blend dark humor with peppy, clever songs, crisp dialogue, and spectacular choreography, all of which are essential elements of great American musical theater. It is not often that we see religious irreverence and profanity bred with “family-style” entertainment, and that is what makes this show such a creative watershed in Broadway history.

“South Park” funny men Trey Parker and Matt Stone, with the help of *Avenue Q* co-author Robert Lopez, have taken an episode of the derisive TV show that parodied Mormon founder Joseph Smith, Jr.—the “American Moses”—and the foundations of his Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and transformed the church’s teachings into an instant, feel-good American musical-comedy classic that theatergoers of all faiths will appreciate for its well-crafted humor and brilliant score. Broadway’s *The Book of Mormon* doesn’t just jab the satirical needle into Mormons, but all religions that have tried to “save souls” and conquer foreign lands as “missionaries.”

Everything here is ingenious in its depiction of America has a homogenized “promised land” and a “New Jerusalem of the New World”—especially Scott Pask’s sets, showing Wal Mart and Wendy’s juxtaposed next to the sacred Mormon Tabernacle, sitting against the backdrop of the snow-capped mountains in

Salt Lake City, Utah.

When the young Mormons learn from their church leader the name of which far-away land they will be spending two years as a missionary, the show's two male leads, the handsome, goody-goody Elder Price (Andrew Rannells) and rotund, geeky misfit Elder Cunningham (Josh Gad) are both appointed to Uganda. After a bon voyage send-off by their families at the Salt Lake City International Airport, complete with a *Lion King*-style serenade, the two youngsters travel to the Dark Continent with much trepidation.

The villagers in the AIDS-ravaged Ugandan village have, of course, seen their share of Christian missionaries, so they are naturally skeptical about the arrival of squeaky-clean young men in suits touting Mormonism. The Ugandans have enough to deal with, particularly a tyrant who threatens to circumcise all the village women, and they are not about to fall under the spell of more non-African outsiders trying to offer Christ's "salvation" as a panacea for their myriad troubles.

The Ugandans belt out their disapproval to the missionaries in the hysterical showstopper "Hasa Diga Eeobawi," which in their own language is a purportedly a lyrical slam that is one big "f*** you" to the Mormons' beloved "Heavenly Father." However, just as the missionaries realize that they are not going to meet their quota of Mormon baptisms, the sweet-natured, beautiful young villager Nabulungi (the winsome, effervescent Nikki M. James) takes a shine to Elder Cunningham, much to the disapproval of the girl's father, Mafala Hatimbi (Michael Potts). Elder Cunningham twists the facts about Mormonism around to suit the needs of the incredulous Ugandans. The onstage chemistry between Mr. Gad, Ms. James, and Mr. Hannells is truly amazing. Mr. Gad and Mr. Hannells are incandescent as a mismatched pair of missionary "companions," while Ms. James has a winning mix of naïveté and spunk that consistently demands our attention whenever she is onstage.

Things do not go as planned as the plot unravels, but along the way audiences are treated to some of the most infectious songs we've heard on Broadway in ages, from "Baptize Me," "Joseph Smith American Moses" and "We Are Africa" (which eviscerates do-gooder Bono, among others) to "Spooky Mormon Hell," complete with dancing devils and Starbucks coffee cups, Adolph Hitler, Jeffrey Dahmer, and O.J. Simpson attorney Johnnie Cochrane. There's even a tap-dancing production number, featuring Mormon boys in glittery pink vests, a nod to the Mormons' notorious condemnation of gays and lesbians.

Is it all blasphemous? That's debatable, as much of the narrative fairly follows, albeit in a comic way, the history of Mormons. Their religion is based on founder Joseph Smith, Jr., believing an angel, Moroni (played with over-the-top zeal by Rory O'Malley, who also doubles in the role of Elder McKinley) appeared to him in the 1800s in Rochester, NY, and told him about a people whom God had led from Jerusalem to America 600 years before Jesus' birth. The angel purportedly introduced Smith to a third "New Testament" to the Bible: the eponymous Book of Mormon. The show's seamless songs and witty lyrics celebrate Mormonism while mocking it simultaneously.

Directors Casey Nicholaw (best known for choreographing the equally sacrilegious *Monty Python's*

Spamalot) and Trey Parker make all the action, songs, and the actors' fluid repartee blend together into a harmonious, uproarious evening of theater that, for many, will make one an instant convert to the genius of *The Book of Mormon*.

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Editor's Note: www.StageZine.com, celebrating our 1-Year Anniversary on the Internet. We want to express our gratitude to all the theater PR professionals, industry organizations, and, most of all, our readers, followers and fans for their continued support and kind words throughout the past year, helping make www.StageZine.com a success.

Broadway Listings

NouNou On Broadway

Broadway Capsule Reviews by David NouNou

ORIGINAL MUSICALS



MORMONS ON A MISSION: (left to right) Rema Webb, Andrew Rannells, Josh Gad in *The Book of Mormon*. Photo: Joan Marcus



THE BOOK OF MORMON

It seems that each decade Broadway generates a landmark immortal musical. In the 1950s, it was *My Fair Lady*; in the 1960s, *Fiddler on the Roof*; and in the 1970s, *A Chorus Line*, etc., (you get the idea). Well, the New Millennium has finally gotten its groundbreaking musical and it is, without question, *The Book of Mormon*. I know some of you will say, "Well, what about *The Producers*?" And I say that show was highly overrated and nothing earth shattering or original, as it relied heavily on its star power. If you want original, nothing compares to *The Book of Mormon*. The score, book, direction, acting, choreography, and design are all brilliant, and oddly enough, its roots are embedded, like the classics mentioned earlier, in the traditional but unconventional Broadway musical manner of starting with a great book and score and building on it from there.

From the first episode of TV's "South Park," I have been a huge fan of Matt Stone and Trey Parker. Their sense of humor is unique and fascinating. Nothing is sacred to them, and the word fear is not in their vocabulary. Irreverence is their mantra. Teaming up with Robert Lopez, who co-wrote *Avenue Q*, was a match made in Broadway heaven, for what they used was their brain, talent, and ingenuity to create a work of art and genius. No multimillion-dollar budget and over-inflated egos; just sheer power of the word and the music. Throw in clever and inspired direction and choreography by Casey Nicholaw and a hugely talented cast, headed by Andrew Rannells and Josh Gad, both of whom are sublime, and the lovely Nikki M. James and Rory O'Malley are wonderful in what should be Tony Award-winning supporting roles. Hell, throw in Tony Awards for everything, starting with Best Musical, Best Musical Book, Best Score, and Best Direction on down the line.

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