



'HEAVENLY' MUSICAL IS HELL TO SIT THROUGH.

Raúl Esparza (center)

as a traveling preacher and the gospel ensemble of 'Leap of Faith.' Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

Not even a miracle could save *Leap of Faith*

LEAP OF FAITH

Music by Alan Menken

Lyrics by Glen Slater

Book by Janus Cerone & Warren Leight

Choreography by Sergio Trujillo

Directed by Christopher Ashley

St. James Theatre

246 West 44th Street

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

By David NouNou

Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Once the illustrious home of such mega-hits as the likes of *Oklahoma*, *Hello Dolly* and *The Producers*, the poor St. James Theatre has fallen on really hard times. Last December, it had the misfortune to be saddled with the horrifically dreadful bomb *On a Clear Day* and, this spring, with *Leap of Faith*. How much more can this poor theater endure? Please, brothers and sisters, get down on your knees and pray awfully hard for a miracle that, someday in the fall, a brand-new, *good* musical hit will once again grace the stage of the magnificent St. James.

Where does one begin with *Leap of Faith*? Let's see: Present day, in the small town of Sweetwater, Kansas. An evangelical bus breaks down, the town is dirt poor, in desperate need of rain, and there is an evangelist (Raúl Esparza), his con-artist sister and his gospel singers, and a lady sheriff whose husband died in a car accident, so she is single. In the same accident, her son became a cripple and is wheelchair-bound. No more hints. Once the characters were introduced, I figured out the plot line and the ending in 12 seconds. I have given you enough clues to beat my record. Talk amongst yourselves.

Mr. Esparza is one of the best, hardest-working, versatile actors the Broadway stage has ever produced. He is a talent to be reckoned with. He puts his heart and soul into each of the shows, I know. I have seen all his performances, starting with the revival of *The Rocky Horror Show*, *Taboo*, *Speed-the-Plow*, *Company*, *Arcadia*, and even *Chitty, Chitty Bang Bang*, and more. Even with all his God-given talents, a great singing voice, good dancer, a great actor, blessed with charm and charisma, this brilliant stage veteran cannot get this turkey to flap its wings or breathe any form of life into it, and he plays the evangelist Jonas Nightingale.

I feel that, since this show has opened, Frank Wildhorn may sleep a little better, for he has passed the cursed trifecta torch to Alan Menken. This torch is the dreaded one when too many shows by the same composer are produced, one after another, until ultimately one of those scores brings the winning streak to a screeching halt. *Sister Act* was vibrant and bouncy; *Newsies* was infectiously buoyant; and *Leap of Faith* lost it all. Yes, there are plenty of gospel songs and good voices (particularly from Kecia Lewis-Evans as gospel singer Ida Mae Sturdevant and Leslie Odom, Jr. as her son, Isaiah), but there are no memorable songs. After a while all the songs start sounding alike. Please do not write, text or tweet me that Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice have trifectas as well. They do not count because *Evita* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* are successful revivals.

I will spare you the book. It is pedestrian and predictable. There are no standout performances because none have been written. Choreographer Sergio Trujillo has done his best with some high-energy dances. In the end, I felt myself and quite a few of my fellow lost souls at the theater, were at a sham revival meeting where I felt I was scammed out of two and a half, oh-so-long hours of my life.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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