



PEACE, LOVE & SHALOM: Eric Anderson (Shlomo) & Amber Iman (Nina Simone) in 'Soul Doctor'.
Photo: Carol Rosegg



Theater Review

Soul Doctor: bio-musical of 'Rock Star Rabbi'

SOUL DOCTOR

Book by Daniel S. Wise

Lyrics by David Schechter

Music & additional lyrics by Shlomo Carlebach

Choreography by Benoit-Swan Pouffer

Directed by Daniel S. Wise

Circle in the Square Theatre

1633 Broadway (50th St. between Broadway & 8th)

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

By Scott Harrah

One doesn't have to be Jewish to appreciate the hyperactive cultural mash-up that is *Soul Doctor*, a bio-musical tale about the life of singing rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, but it helps to have some knowledge of Judaism because this is hardly an ethnic Broadway opus with the mass appeal of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Despite its flaws, this ambitious gem is consistently entertaining, with infectious songs and bouncy energy that never flags.

Writer/director Daniel S. Wise takes us on an epic "journey of a rock star rabbi" that starts with young Shlomo in Nazi-occupied Vienna, as he witnesses a Jewish man shot in the street by one of Hitler's soldiers. His family decides to make the long trip to America and settles in Brooklyn. Mr. Wise's narrative is often fast-paced but too "speedy," as if the musical is hopped up on amphetamines. Many of the supporting characters, particularly Shlomo's mother (Jacqueline Anatriamian), are caricatures of every half-baked Yiddish stereotype ever seen on stage or screen, speaking in accents even Jackie Mason would have difficulty understanding. Benoit-Swan Pouffer's scattershot choreography does not help matters, with chorus members leaping onstage and out into the audience, twirling and whirling in a manner that is often confusing and downright annoying. Is it Jewish folk dancing? African-American jazz and gospel movements? Or a combination? Go figure.

However, two actors keep everything together: Eric Anderson, giving a dynamic performance as the charming Shlomo; and the incandescent Amber Iman as "High Priestess of Soul" Nina Simone (they meet in a Village bar one night and start an unlikely friendship). The two, from opposite backgrounds, find out they have something in common. He's still reeling from the recent horrors of the Holocaust, while she's rattled by the equally heinous bigotry against blacks in her native South. Ms. Iman is the true standout of the two. Whenever she's onstage, she nearly overshadows Mr. Anderson's Shlomo with her effervescent stage presence. Ms. Iman also has the best set of pipes in the cast, whether she's belting out such songs as "I Put a Spell On You" in her mellifluous voice, or singing the duet "Ki Va Moed" with Shlomo.

Most of the story involves Shlomo's rise to cult stardom as a folk singer and how his orthodox family (particularly his rabbi father, played by Jamie Jackson) reacts to his decision to sing at Nina Simone's Baptist church; recording an album after being "discovered" in Washington Square Park; and eventually moving to San Francisco at the height of the "flower power" hippie movement in the 1960s. The show gets its emotional power from the cultural clash amongst Old World Judaism, African American music, the fight for civil rights, and the countercultural revolution

of the Vietnam era. After appearing at the 1966 Berkeley Music Festival, Shlomo founds a totally unorthodox synagogue, The House of Love and Prayer, in San Francisco's acid-dropping Haight Ashbury district.

Soul Doctor played Off-Broadway last year. There have likely been changes since the transfer, but at more than two and a half hours, with 35 songs (as of press time), the show would be far more enjoyable with some trimming. Musicals work best when they are collaborative efforts. However, when a musical is directed by the same person who wrote the book, it lacks vision, and that's the case here with writer/director David S. Wise. There is little structure, yet so many characters and songs, and it is often impossible to keep up with them all. *Soul Doctor* is based on a real-life (yet mostly obscure) cult star, but Mr. Wise spends so much time covering minor figures and pointless moments from Shlomo Carlebach's life that sometimes feel like padding. Regardless, as a fun, upbeat musical biography, *Soul Doctor* delivers.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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