

Reach out and touch

Creating the Magic at "Motown: The Musical"

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THE SMILES TELL the whole story. Inside Broadway recently presented another Creating the Magic event, bringing about 2,500 public school children into the Lunt Fontanne Theater to peak behind the curtain of "Motown, the Musical." It was a fascinating and entertaining 90-minute presentation that revealed some of the secrets to producing a Broadway musical. Cast, orchestra members, stage managers and crew provided these students with a priceless experience of seeing first-hand the multiple roles – both on and off stage – required to run a live Broadway show night after night.

But the true magic of this musical is the power of the music itself – the music of Motown that reached out and touched a nation in the 1960s and became a voice of change and unity.

Motown made more than just musical history. It was the most successful record company at the time, owned and managed by African-Americans, with over 79 top-ten records on the Billboard charts between 1960 and 1969. Motown artists toured nationally and internationally, breaking down racial barriers as they brought new, fresh, unabashed soul and R&B to concert audiences of all ages and races.

To get a flavor for the times, listen to the inimitable words of Motown singer/songwriter Smokey Robinson. A

few years ago, Robinson told the New Orleans Times-Picayune, "Into the 60s, I was still not of a frame of mind that we were not only making music; we were making history. But I did recognize the impact because acts were going all over the world at that time. I recognized the bridges that we crossed, the racial problems and the barriers that we broke down with music. I recognized that because I lived it."

The articulate cast of "Motown: The Musical" constantly referred to the power of this timeless music throughout the presentation and how it affected them personally. Additionally, they stressed the importance of education. They urged the young students to be diligent about their schoolwork. One cast member put it beautifully: "It leads you to dream bigger."

Local 802 pianist/conductor/arranger Joseph Joubert lead a pared-down orchestra with Saadi Zain on electric bass, keyboardist Willard Meeks and drummer Bill Lanham. (The regular pit holds 18 musicians nightly, including violin, viola and cello.) The captivated audience attentively listened to Joubert explain his role as music director, working with the singers and orchestra, shaping and stylizing the music.

Joubert was amazed at how the children responded. "It was a great experience participating in the event," he told Allegro. "I remember how important it was for me when I saw my first Broadway show at 13. The kids at Creating the Magic were riveted and well behaved so you know they will be positively

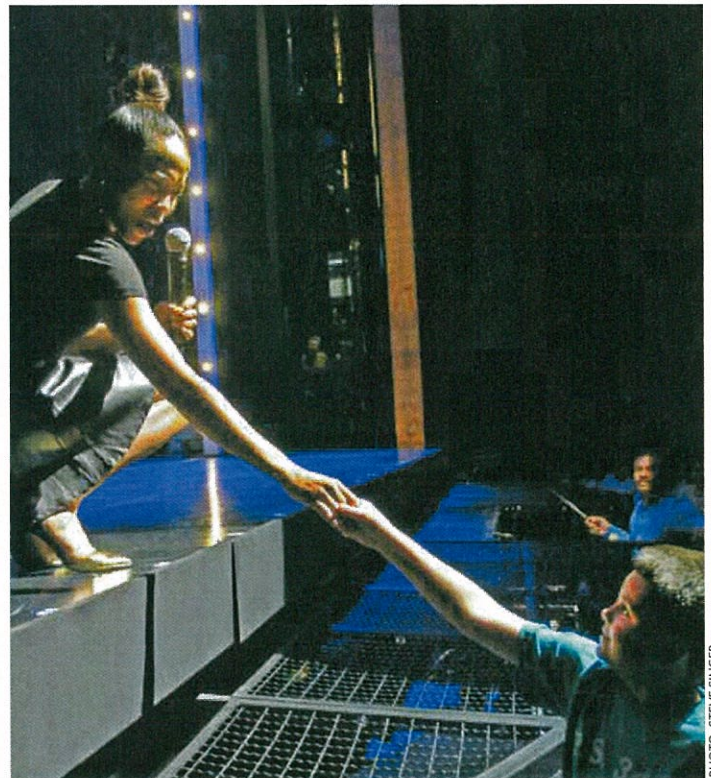


PHOTO: STEVE SINGER

HAND TO HAND: [name of actress] from "Motown: the Musical" reaches from the stage to a young audience member as conductor Joseph Joubert looks on.

affected by the experience. It gives me hope that the next generation will keep this live performing idiom going. What a thrill to have been part of this!"

Tom Olcott, the union's financial vice president, spoke enthusiastically about the miracle of Broadway and the importance of the different unions involved, particularly Local 802. "It is truly amazing that all these people do this live, every night," he told the kids.

Perhaps one of the more stunning moments of the presentation came when

Dionne Figgins sang the Motown classic "Reach Out and Touch." She brought two children up from the audience to sing with her and at one point, literally reaching out to hold one lucky boy's hand. It was beautiful, powerful and affecting. Everyone at Inside Broadway, along with the cast, crew and orchestra members, indeed reached out and hopefully touched the lives of the students present that day.

As the song says, together we can make this world a better place!

MORE ABOUT INSIDE BROADWAY

Inside Broadway is a professional New York City based children's theatre company committed to producing Broadway's classic musicals in a contemporary light for young audiences. Its aim is to pass down the rich legacy of America's musical theatre to future generations so that the magic, music, and universal themes of the genre are not lost, but rediscovered and made relevant for today's youth. Michael Presser is the organization's executive director; Nick Sala is the company manager. For more, see www.InsideBroadway.org.