'Motown: The Musical': Theater Review

Michael Jackson, Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross and the R&B classics from the Motor City get the treatment as Broadway's rousing jukebox musical about the birth of Motown hits the road.

BY JORDAN RIEFE MAY 4, 2015 5:23PM

Motown the Musical Production Still - H 2015

JOAN MARCUS

If you plan to see *Motown: The Musical* because you're a fan of R&B icons like **Marvin Gaye**, **Diana Ross** and **Stevie Wonder**, then you won't be disappointed. Classics from the '60s and '70s get ample airing, but even with a score featuring more than 40 indelible tunes, you may find yourself wanting more. Not music, but more drama. The problem with *Motown* — which recently went on hiatus from a successful two-year Broadway run and is planning to reopen next summer — isn't its illustrious list of songs. It's the banal book by **Berry Gordy**, based on his 1994 memoir, *To Be Loved*. Unfortunately, whatever gift the legendary Motown founder has for discovering talent, he lacks in storytelling.

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The show opens in 1983, with Gordy (**Julius Thomas III**) in his Los Angeles home brooding about an upcoming televised salute to Motown. It was great while it lasted, but over the years most of the people he turned into stars have left him for more lucrative contracts with major labels.

The action flashes back to Gordy's childhood, and the landmark boxing match between **Joe Louis** and **Max Schmeling**, and then skips ahead to the 1950s, when Gordy borrows money from his family to get into the record business. The scene plays out to the on-the-nose music choice, "Money (That's What I Want)." That dovetails nicely with the Temptations' "Get Ready," which becomes a mashup with "Dancing in the Street." Like any good jukebox musical, the hits just keep on coming. But instead of letting classic melodies play out, they are intercut and abbreviated in order to ensure enough time to present seemingly every artist who ever passed through the hallowed halls of Hitsville, U.S.A.

Gordy's book doesn't help matters. It serves mainly to provide clunky dialogue links designed to set up the next number. There's little conflict for the first third of the show, as Gordy strikes up a romance with Diana Ross (**Allison Semmes**). She sings "I Hear a Symphony" after he has problems in bed in a Paris hotel; it's an unfortunate juxtaposition but the most conflict *Motown* can muster until a lawsuit with hitmaker songwriting team Holland-Dozier-Holland is filed, prompting a militaristic ensemble piece set to **Edwin Starr**'s "War."

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No sooner has the show stumbled over a little drama than it dusts itself off and continues along as if nothing happened. **Martin Luther King Jr.** is shot as Marvin Gaye (**Jarran Muse**) sings "What's Going On," an anthem of social unrest that resonated powerfully on the tour's opening night in Los Angeles, as the Baltimore uprising unfolded. But without attention to drama and character, such major historic events seem to form a checklist — **J.F.K.** assassination, Vietnam, Ross going solo.

That last occurence may appear insignificant by comparison, but it brings badly needed dimension to Ross' character in a field of flat characterizations. Unfortunately, the drama between Ross and **Florence Ballard** (**Krisha Marcano**), so dramatically captured in the semifictionalized *Dreamgirls*, barely warrants a nod here as the production rushes onward to introduce a young **Michael Jackson**, (a showstopping **Leon Outlaw Jr.**), not to forget **Gladys Knight**, (**Ashley Tamar Davis**), **Rick James** (**Rashad Naylor**) and **Teena Marie** (**Melanie Evans**).

A member of the Broadway ensemble, Thomas seizes the spotlight in the touring company, embodying Gordy with boyish enthusiasm. While he struggles with thin material, the full-throated tenor excels vocally, bringing warmth and empathy to his character. As Ross, Semmes carves a fine arc from flirtatious schoolgirl to pop diva. She shimmers in gowns by costume designer **ESosa**, as she warbles through the early classics and a fine rendition of "Reach Out and Touch (Somebody's Hand)," in which she engages the audience with phony sentiment.

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Choreographers **Patricia Wilcox** and **Warren Adams** offer numerous standard-issue dance moves of the era, while director **Charles Randolph-Wright** seems primarily concerned with getting his cast to the next number. Yes, it's all about the songs, but they could have been bolstered by a proper story with characters instead of cutouts, a failing that denies the audience emotional catharsis.

As it is, *Motown* has all the crowd-pleasing chemistry it needs built into its extraordinary music, making the shaky book scenes almost superfluous. Gordy proved his entrepreneurial skills by bringing the world some of the most unforgettable music of the century. He might have proven them again by delegating script duties to a more experienced writer.

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Cast: Julius Thomas III, Allison Semmes, Jesse Nager, Jarran Muse, Erick Buckley, Patrice Covington, Nathaniel Cullors, Jamarice Daughty, Ashley Tamar Davis, Lynorris Evans, Melanie Evans, Anissa Felix, Devon Goffman, Jennie Harney, Rod Harrelson, Robert Hartwell, Rodney Earl Jackson Jr., Trisha Jeffrey, Elijah Ahmad Lewis, Jarvis B. Manning Jr., Krishna Marcano, Marq Moss, Rashad Naylor, Chadae Nichol, Leon Outlaw Jr., Ramone Owens, Nicholas Ryan, Jamison Scott, Reed L. Shannon, Joey Stone, Doug Storm, Martina Sykes, Donald Webber Jr., Galen J. Williams
Director: Charles Randolph-Wright
Book: Berry Gordy, based on his autobiography, 'To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown'
Music and lyrics: Motown catalog
Choreographer: Patricia Wilcox, Warren Adams
Set designer: David Korins
Costume designer: ESosa
Lighting designer: Natasha Katz
Presented by Kevin McCollum, Doug Morris, Berry Gordy

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