



# The Culture Buzz

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### **It's no act, sister, this musical rocks**

A theatre review by John Busbee

*April 3, 2016* *Sister Act* is a divinely entertaining show, and let “nun” tell you different. The Des Moines Playhouse delivers a laugh-out-loud musical romp sure to bring even the most curmudgeonly atheist to his feet in zealous joy as the songs, acting and dance ratchet up this hallowed space to revival levels.

Based on a 1992 cult hit comedy film of the same name, starring Whoopi Goldberg at her irreverent best, the stage version (Music by Alan Menken, Lyrics by Glenn Slater, Book by Cheri and Bill Steinkeller) translates nicely onto bare boards. *Sister Act* follow the misadventures of Deloris Van Cartier, a wannabe singing sensation with a penchant for bad choices. Believing that at Christmas, her boyfriend, Curtis, will give her the big break she's been seeking, he instead re-gifts a Smurf-blue fur coat that was his wife's. When Deloris decides to break up with Curtis and return the coat, she walks into Curtis and his three henchmen killing someone they believe informed on them. Deloris escapes, finds protection through a police officer, Eddie, with whom she went to high school. The protection is hiding her in a convent called Queen of Angels Cathedral, South Philadelphia. The story merrily spins into feel-good chaos, complete with happy ending.

Director Judy Hart brings a wealth of experience, talent and understanding to this production. She has instilled in her well-chosen cast the strong sense of campy fun this show offers as she and her production team put the entire entertainment package together. Some exceptional debut talent is featured in this show, and it's great to see these new faces shine with Playhouse veterans. Jeff Stander's agile scenic design allows for a refreshing fluidity to the multiple scenic locations, giving minimal time between scenes. Such efficiency gives the audience the chance to flow with the show, and enjoy the ride without any long scene shifts. That is the kind of attention to details, like a good lighting design (well done, Virgil Klienhesselink), that goes unnoticed if done well, a compliment to the designers behind such production elements.

The show opens with a bold display of artistic sass in the person of Deloris Van Cartier, given vibrant, alluring and very talented life by Alexandra St. James-Gray. This debut leading performance, even with a few bumps in the performance road, was irresistible. St. James-Gray embodies all the sashay and vigor her Deloris character demands, delivering with a special panache, as reactions from an enthusiastic audience bore witness. As her boyfriend-turned-hunter, Curtis, Edward M. Barker exudes a lethal power in the execution of his role – and, execution it was that made temptress, Deloris, into his target. His trio of henchmen added delightful comic antics; Joey (memorably played by Douglas Cochran), Pablo (given unctuously vapid humor by Mitchell Nieland) and newcomer TJ (delivering side-splitting second-banana antics by Donovan McCamey – we hope to see more of him in future shows).

Eddie the cop is masterfully portrayed by Christopher Rozenboom. His physical shtick is brilliant, as he awkwardly pratfalls and faux pas' his way back into Deloris' world, now as her protector. Rozenboom and St. James-Gray have a great stage chemistry. They have powerful, yet evocative, voices and display impressive stage presence, with whomever they are working onstage. Gary Scherer's affable, go-with-the-flow Monsignor O'Hara delights, and Mother Superior soars, thanks to Jennifer Phelps, delivering some of her best stage work to date. Phelps counters the more energetic characters, bringing a rich balance to the ensemble. Some of her singing brought the house to a mesmerized hush.

The sisters were an absolute hoot as their “waddle of penguins” took turns with their feature moments, one great moment after another. Collectively, they delivered some of the best production numbers (a tip of the habit to another fine job by choreographer, Alison Shafer), often bringing the audience to a fevered, delighted pitch. Their individuality was delicious, from the effervescent Sister Mary Patrick (Melissa Kellar) to the irrepressible senior nun, Sister Mary Lazarus (Therese Riordan). A particularly noteworthy performance was delivered by Tricia Arvanis, another newcomer, as Sister Mary Robert. Arvanis, destined for great things, truly is a triple-threat, bringing an enviable performance package that quickly captured the audience's heart. Her reprise of “The Life I Never Led” was a show stopper, and her characterization of Sister Mary Robert captivated.

Jim Cacciatore's leadership of a fantastic eight-piece orchestra, under musical director Anna Lackaff, gave a special musical foundation to the show. Angela Lampe dusted off her polyester collection and her imagination, garbing the show with authenticity of the late 1970s, and many special looks for her nuns. This performance did provide that live theatre thrill when a tear-away costume was supposed to reveal another costume before yet another replaced the original look, but adrenalin-rushed hands must've held too strongly, for both layers came off at the same time. To the credit of all in that scene, there wasn't a single glitch in performing. Just a memory that will last for years to come.

Other than ongoing challenges with having wireless microphones either not up for performers, feedback or being overshadowed by the orchestra or other factors, this is a show that will deliver a musical theater rapture, and send everyone out the doors in heavenly bliss.