THEATRE REVIEW

Bright and snappy ‘Altar Boyz’ pokes good-natured fun at Big Religion

By Joanne Engelhardt
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Although ‘Altar Boyz’ never got the love showered on “The Book of Mormon” on Broadway, it’s clearly another strong show that lovingly makes fun of all things religious (mostly Catholicism with a few Jewish jokes thrown in here and there).

Directed/choreographer Jason Scott Japp brings “Altar Boyz” to Cabrillo Stage in the summer’s 13th season of three musical productions, and since running until July 13, best to head in down to see it soon.

Two sets of five men work together to give this production over, authenticity and electricity. First, there’s the quintet of high-energy young actors who play the skits/script/orchestrature of the fictional “Altar Boyz” Christian boy band from Ohio and need to keep five dynamic musicians who are center stage throughout the production and frequently interact in the show.

They’re led by conductor/keyboardist Max Bennett-Parker, no disco in the acting category as usual.

But it is the darting, darting, darting (sometimes dorky) Altar Boyz who keep this particular ball moving at the speed of sound. At just 90 minutes (without intermission), the audience is into it with cheers, applause and an occasional clap-along.

The surprising thing about this musical is that there’s not one song the audience is likely to know, yet they’re all so much fun, so listenable and so similar to other melodies that they were big hits 30 or 30 years ago.

‘Altar Boyz’ was created by Gary Adler, Michael Patrick Rockwell and Kevin Del Aguila from a story idea by Marc Kessler and Ken Davernport, and never quite made it to Broadway. But it ran for almost five years off-Broadway (from 2000 to 2001), so, in some ways, “Mormon” owes a debt to “Boyz” for showing that it’s OK to make good-hearted fun of religions.

The setup for the show is that the audience is attending the final concert of the Altar Boyz’ national “Raise the Pride” tour, done in real time and, as one cast member explains, “We’ve never played in Aples before.”

The clear captain of the group is Matthew (strong, voiced James Nathnalukum), and three others are named after the first four apostles: Matt (kurt), Ferris Reynolds (Mark) and red suspenders and tight turquoise pants), Luke (bephopcity) (bephopcity) (Jo- mar Martinez) and Juan (get it? “John” in Spanish), played with attitude by Brian Conroy. How an earnest Jewish boy gets thrown into the mix makes for an interesting angle, and Jovana Cruze Richard is that sincere young man, Abraham, whose family sits up in his head.

As the boys cry up to “al- ter your mind” with their powerful “We see the Altar Boyz,” opening number ignites multiple shout outs to their sponsor, Sony, giant television screens on both sides of the stage provide the visual presence of the Soul Sensor DO-10, which reportedly tallies up the number of “boredom seeds” in the audience. At the start of their concert, the number is 19, but the boys vow to reduce that number to zero by the time they sing their final song.

They finally do—after a lot of personal “soul searching.” It’s a lot of froth, syrupy entertainment, laced with a few coy comments like “The old guy (God) is making a comeback” and “Jesus called me on my cellulose” (a lyric from their song “The Calling”). At one point, God, apparently conscious of the big screen, puts up the words “I’ve never left, just say it!” and, later, “I’m trending right now.” As the resident guy in the group, Curtis Reynolds (Mark) makes every face on the audience experience the hill. He brings down the house singing (and mugging) “I Am a Catholic.”

Scott’s choreography is perfectly suited to the energy and versatility of her young charges, so the entire 90 minutes seems to fly. In Culley’s scenic design is uncomplicated, and effective, especially the tall multicolored panels at show’s end. Band design by Michael Meck is clear, although some of the song lyrics are difficult to deci- ple. And while Sean NIch- oll’s overall lighting for the set is effective, it’s a real misstep to aim those ultra high beams at the audience several times. They are flat- net blinding, as they should be toned down or di- rected elsewhere.

The “Altar Boyz” at Cabrillo Stage include (from left): Brian Conway, Jamar Martinez, James Nathnalukum, Curtis Reynolds and Jordan Stiffield.

CABRILLO STAGE’S ‘ALTAR BOYZ’

Directed by: Jamie Scott
When: July 13, 7:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday matinees.
Where: Cabrillo Stage, Cabrillo Crocker Theater, 6500 Squirrel Dr., Agua Dulce
Tickets: $18-$43
Details: 661-479-6150 or www.cabrilloc舞台.com

The quicksand of机身, the final scene of the musical's success. A great start to Cabrillo's summer musical season.