



Photos by Erin Mizelle for the Winston-Salem Chronicle
Bethany Heath leads "Let Us Go Back to the Old Landmark."



"The Glory of Gospel" cast performs "Come and Go with Me to my Father's House" in rehearsal.

'Glory of Gospel' captures journey of African-Americans

Bethany Heath pays homage to late father

BY CHANEL DAVIS
THE CHRONICLE

Love listening to those foot-stomping, hand-clapping Negro spirituals? Interested in the history of one of the oldest genres of music? If so, you are in for a treat this weekend as the North Carolina Black Repertory Company closes its 2014-2015 season with "The Glory of Gospel."

The play, written and directed by Mabel Robinson, follows the music origins in the African-American culture from the seashores of the Motherland and through the United States Civil Rights Movement in the '60s and '70s. The 24-person cast will touch on everything from message songs, hymns to more contemporary music.

"I was commissioned by Stardust Productions in Holland. They have a large black community there and I had done some work there before. I started by rewriting what they wrote. Afterward, they asked me to write something on gospel music. That's when I came up with the idea for "The Glory of Gospel." I wrote it and they did it for three years," Robinson said. "When I came back, I spoke with Larry Leon and he said 'I think with some rewrites this would be a good show for our Winston-Salem audience. Being in the Bible Belt, the people like things of this nature.'"

Robinson said that the reason it was decided to do the musical this season was because so many people were asking about it. It was first done in 1997 at the National Black Theatre Festival and again in 2009.

"Several people have been asking about it. People seem to enjoy it and it's for everybody, from 4 to 400," Robinson said. "I think any time that we can put our history on stage, it's wonderful. Theatre is a marvelous venue to use to teach and keep our young people abreast of what was and putting it in a format where they can enjoy it."

According to Robinson, the first act takes you on that journey of The Middle



Alfred Clemons with Joshua Greer in the background (leading "Royal Telephone")



Matelyn Alicia shows joy as she performs in "The Glory of Gospel."

Passage, the auctioneers' block and life on the plantation, all the way up to the Emancipation Proclamation through gospels and spirituals.

"Since the languages were stolen from us, we couldn't bring our drums and we just couldn't do anything," she said. "A lot of the spirituals became message songs and work songs so that we found a way of communicating and stayed connected to the motherland. That's been our savior in our culture throughout our work, play, services, funerals, escapes and events like that."

In the second act, the musical covers the 1900s through the 1970s and the gospel groups that came from them, black composers like Thomas A. Dorsey and Lucie Campbell woven throughout the Civil Rights Era and the commercialism of gospel.

"It's a tribute to the early writers and early groups," Robinson said.

Robinson said that residents can expect to hear music from Robert Bradley, The Spirit of Memphis, The Angelic Gospel Singers, The Mighty Clouds of Joy, Mahalia Jackson, James Cleveland and the Jubilee Singers.

The director said that it's great to see so many youth involved in the production. There are five teenagers from the company's Teen Theatre in the cast.

"We try to encourage them to do things in history as well, so that they can teach their peers. Sometimes teenagers will listen to teenagers better than adults," Robinson said. "I see them looking and wondering about some things and I tell them to go to their famous computer and look it up. They always say 'Ms. Robinson, I didn't know' and I tell them that there is so much you don't know but once you are given a touch of something, you must find it in your spirit to try to learn more and continue to develop it."

Bethany Heath, who plays one of the lead vocalists in the musical, has been around North Carolina Black Repertory productions the majority of her life. She said that it was important for her to be a part of this season's musical to pay homage to her father, the late Apostle John H. Heath, who was one of the musical's original cast members. He died Jan. 23, 2015, and was the founder and pastor of Greater Higher Ground Worldwide Ministries Inc.

He was known for his rich baritone voice that he often lent to choirs and the Company.

"Before he passed, he heard that the show was going to be back on stage and said he was going to be a part of that. I told him I was going to be a part of it too, so I guess we will be onstage together. He didn't live to see that," she said.

This is her first time in this production, but she said she's excited about the role and working with Robinson. She said that she's never done a show with that many musical selections. There are about 52 songs.

"Mabel Robinson is great. I love working with her. I grow and learn more every time I work with her," Heath said. "I love it. It is so much music and it (the transition) happens so fast. It's been rewarding for me to see how African-Americans were treated then up until now and how the culture has changed."

Heath said her favorite song out of the musical is "I Wanna Go Where Jesus Is."

"It's a more personal song. At the end of it I always say, even in rehearsals, I got a daddy waiting there because my father lived so that he could go to heaven one day," she

said. "Singing that particular song is like my tribute to him."

Robinson said that residents every where can relate to the musical because of how far gospel reaches into the people's lives.

"Gospel just continues to grow, even with the young people rapping the gospel message. It's something that has been a part of our lives and I think it's something that will continue to be a part of our lives," Robinson said. "If I can touch one, I feel good."

Robinson said that she has left the musical in a format where it could be changed in the future to continue to show the progression of the genre.

"Hopefully it will be someone else that will take it in hand and say 'Let's do the extended version' or 'Let's do Volume Two.' I

am trying to encourage the young people that we have who are currently trying to do some writing," Robinson said. "Hopefully, the young people will continue it into 2015."

The Glory of Gospel

Performance dates: are Friday through Saturday, May 15-17 and group rates are available for large parties. Tickets range from \$18 to \$26. All tickets purchased online will be held at the office and can be picked up Monday thru Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Picking them up at the door is also an option.

To purchase your tickets or for more information, visit <http://ncblackrep.org/buy-tickets> or call 336-723-2266.

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Gospel music superstars bringing free concert to Triad

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

McDonald's Inspiration Celebration Gospel Tour is coming to Greensboro for a free night of inspiration and joyful song on Thursday, May 21 at Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Doors open at 6 p.m. and the concert starts at 7 p.m.

Some of gospel music's biggest acts have partnered with McDonald's to give back to communities across the nation through the 14-city concert series.

Attendees will be encouraged to support the Triad's Ronald McDonald House of Winston-Salem by donating to help local families served by the charity.

Hosting the tour is Stellar Award-nominated artist and radio personality Lonnie Hunter. Joining him on stage will be music director and songwriter Donald Lawrence, evangelist and the "Rose of Gospel" Dorinda Clark-Cole, Ricky Dillard, urban inspirational artist DeWayne Woods, Stellar Award nominee and BET's "Sunday Best" season

six winner Tasha Page-Lockhart and Christian comedienne Small Fire.

In 2014, the Triad community helped raise more than \$30,000 to benefit Ronald McDonald House Charities.

The cross-country concert series, back for its ninth year, will kick off on May 13 and run through October 17, making stops in Atlanta, Charlotte, Chicago, Detroit, Greensboro, Houston, Indianapolis, Jackson, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Raleigh, St. Louis and Washington, D.C.

Reserve tickets to the Greensboro concert at www.365black.com and from the following physical locations: Greensboro LifeWay Christian Store, 5417-B Sapp Road in Greensboro; Burlington LifeWay Christian Store in Alamance Center, 1348 Java Lane, Suite 106 in Burlington; and Winston-Salem LifeWay Christian Store in Hanes Point, 1082 Hanes Mall Boulevard in Winston-Salem.