

The good times roll in "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues"

By JOANNE BRANNON ALDRIDGE

NEW YORK — "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues," the Tony nominated musical playing at the Vivian Beaumont at the Lincoln Center Theater, is based on an idea by Ron Taylor. He said the idea for "Blues" came to him when he was taking a break from playing the voice of Audrey II, the carnivorous flower in "Little Shop of Horrors."

While preparing for a role in a Hank Williams revue, Taylor started researching some of the century's great unknown blues men. "I thought, 'When are we going to do a show on these guys?'"

Taylor worked on an outline for a show to take place in a bus terminal populated by ghosts of blues men from the past. In fits and starts, he simplified and developed the idea with his fellow cast members and director Randal Myler. The cast toured regional theaters, including the Crossroads Theatre Company, the 1999 Tony Award-winning regional theater, the San Diego Repertory Company; and the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. The theaters helped refine the show. The bus terminal was left behind along with the ghosts.

Only the blues remained. Taylor says, "It's a simple show really with a very big message: No matter where you're from, no matter what your cultural background is, you can get the blues."

Ron Taylor is a 47-year-old native Texan who gave up football for theater. He can't read music, but he says he plays the piano "with all the grace of an amateur typist. I always had a good ear," Taylor said. "I always knew when it sounded right." He definitely has it "sounding right" at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center. And Taylor is wearing a number of hats in the production. In addition to being the show's "idea man," he is one of the writers, a producing associate and a performer in the power-packed ensemble of three women and four men.

Of performing Taylor says, "That part is easy." Taylor knows how to get inside a song and seduce an audience, particularly with "I'm Your Hootchie Coochie Man," a voodoo-flavored number. Taylor's performance won him a Tony Award nomination for Best Featured Actor in a musical. Also Tony-nominated for Best Featured Actress in a musical is 1995 Tony Award winner Gretha Boston, a multi-

award winning performer who has sung musical theater, operatic roles, oratorio and classical concerts. She is drop-dead terrific singing and acting her blues numbers whether in solo, duet, or ensemble. She performs classic blues numbers like "St. Louis Woman" with sure authority, and her bitter "Strange Fruit" pierces the heart and haunts the soul.

The ensemble is rounded out by "Mississippi" Charles Bevel, Carter Calvert, Eloise Laws, Gregory Porter and Dan Wheatman. Ensemble members all step up, step out and pull out all the stops, putting over one number after another, demonstrating the blues flowing through a variety of music from African chants and spirituals to Delta and Chicago blues to rhythm and blues to country music blues sometimes sung with an Appalachian twang. The ensemble — sometimes in solos, sometimes one in the lead, sometimes in duets, sometimes all together — moved from the humorous, sly, slinky "Crawlin' King Snake," to the country songs "Walkin' After Midnight" and "I Can't Stop Lovin' You," to the disenchanted "The Thrill Is Gone," to every favorite blues song with the audience clapping, singing, joining in when they sang



Photo by Joan Marcus

Ensemble members perform in "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues."

"Goodnight, Irene." Nobody wanted to say "good night." And indeed, the lavish talent held nothing back right to the last number. "Let the Good Times Roll." The good times had rolled

all evening, and "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues" gives all signs of following "Smokey Joe's Cafe" as the longest running musical revue in New York. For tickets, call 212-239-6200

or 1-800-432-7250.

Joanne Brannon Aldridge is a writer from Boone. She writes about Broadway and the arts for The Chronicle.

Entrepreneur returns to housing project

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW ORLEANS — Multimillionaire rapper and businessman Percy "Master P" Miller came back to the housing project where he grew up and threw an all-day party. Officially, he came to shoot a video for "Hoody Hoo" — the new single by Tru, the rap trio of P and his younger brothers Corey "C-Murder" Miller and Vyshonn "Silkk the Shocker" Miller.

But the thousands who crowded around the stage and hung out of windows in the B.W. Cooper project also got lots of food, a parade, free Tru T-shirts and bandannas and Master P action figures, and, of course, the trio itself.

The stage started to buckle after dozens of entourage members crowded on with the performers. P led everyone off, and then he and several others climbed atop the four stretch Humvee limos in front of the stage. He told the throng to cooperate with the cameramen and help "take care of business."

With "Hoody Hoo" blasting from a sound system, P and his brothers lip-synced and danced. After P thrilled fans with an unscripted dash around the barricades separating stage and audience, he disappeared into the VIP area near the production trailers, where he did a round of TV interviews.

The video cameras also were rolling when 10 Mardi Gras Indian tribes — black men in ornate feathered and beaded costumes they sew themselves — 13 social aid and pleasure clubs, and the Rebirth and Hot 8 brass bands kicked off the festivities with a second-line parade.

The parade made its way up Martin Luther King Boulevard and turned into the courtyard of what P still calls "Calliope" — the project's former name, pronounced "KAL'-ee-ope" in New Orleans.

P hasn't performed much in his hometown because of security worries. But Saturday's event went smoothly.

"I put it in God's hands," P said. He said many people have been asking when he would do something in New Orleans.

"I said whenever I did another big video, I'm going to take it home. That's what I did."

"It went excellent. There wasn't no trouble. Everybody came and handled their business. People from all different neighborhoods, from other projects, from out of town — they all had fun."

Saturday's footage will become part of a high-tech music video

inspired by the science-fiction film "The Matrix." Its plot: P and his brothers escape from a futuristic prison and travel back in time to Calliope in the summer of 1999.

The whole production will cost about \$1.5 million, P said. He estimated the cost of Saturday's party — including 110 off-duty police officers hired for security — at \$200,000.

The video will likely make back its cost by spurring album sales.

"Da Crime Family," the Tru CD that contains "Hoody Hoo," was released Tuesday. Even without the video, P said it sold 1 million copies in its first week of release and will likely be the No. 1 album in the nation in the upcoming issue of Billboard. No Limit Records, which P founded and owns, is the nation's top-grossing rap label. Forbes magazine estimated his 1998 income at \$56 million. Besides million-selling albums, P's empire includes films, a line of basketball shoes, a talking Master P doll, a sports agency, athletic clothing, real estate and other interests.

Saturday, P, whose No Limit Sports represents Saints draft pick Ricky Williams, wore a Saints jersey with Williams' name and number.

After the humvees were removed from the courtyard, P, Silkk and C-Murder returned for more filming. In recent years P has mostly split his time between Baton Rouge and Beverly Hills, but he is still active in his old community.

In March he quietly gave \$250,000 to financially strapped St. Monica Elementary, the Catholic grade school that he attended from the first through the eighth grades. A contingent from St. Monica led Saturday's second-line march, carrying a hand-lettered sign that read "Thank you Mr. Miller."

P has financed community parties before, but nothing on the scale of Saturday's.

"I'm happy to be back home and to make this happen," P said. "To be able to give back to my community and show these little kids that I came from here, and that I made it out, and to give them some hope that they can make it. Just by keeping it real and being able to see my people, that's more important than anything right now."

The message was worth the effort, P said.

"I figure if I do the right thing, the man upstairs will continue blessing me, and I might save one of these kids, to be the next me, or even better. That's what I have in my heart now," he said.

origins date before the end of slavery.

The production is directed by Bill Lathan, who received an Obie award for direction of "What If It Turned Up Heads" by J.E. Gaines. Other directing credits include Richard Wesley's "The Sirens" at the Manhattan Theatre Club and "The Fabulous Miss Marie" by Ed Bullins at the Locust Theatre in Philadelphia. As an actor he has performed several principal character roles at the New Lafayette Theatre in plays such as "In the Wine Time," "The Fabulous Miss Marie," "Going To Buffalo," "The Duplex," "A Black Time" and "Psychic Pretenders."

Orman

from page C7

"The Confessions of STEPHEN FETCHIT" presents the public and private lives of Lincoln Perry. A highly successful movie star in the '30s and '40s, Perry was later vilified as the creator of such a horrible racial stereotype. While tracing the life of Lincoln Perry and the development of his controversial film persona, the play stimulates thought and self-examination concerning racial stereotypes. The lazy character, for which Lincoln Perry would become famous, was by no means his own invention. He learned it on the traveling minstrel circuit whose

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