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Behind every great actor is a great gospel singer, literally. In the foreground are, from left, Nikkilei DeMone, Darius DeHaas, Jeannette Bayardelle, Cleavant Derricks, Gregg Baker, Brianna Horne, Mary Bond Davis and Lawrence Stallings.

Photo: Marcus Stern

Singing joy to the 'Worlds'

>Diane Paulus' Shakespeare Exploded! is the 'Best' thing to happen to theater since the Bard began penning plays >Gospel singers give Shakespeare a soul shakedown that stirs

Shakespeare through the eyes of Diane Paulus is an experience you don't want to miss.

The American Repertory Theater's new artistic director has single-handedly made both the Bard and the A.R.T. exciting again. With "Best of Both Worlds," the final installment in her Shakespeare Exploded! Festival, Paulus offers a stripped-down, contemporized re-imagining of "The Winter's Tale" that will astound you with its soulful sounds and brilliantly accessible, edge-of-your-seat storytelling.

Like its inspiration, "Best of Both Worlds" is the story of a powerful man whose anger and jealousy rips apart relationships and ruins lives. But in this version, gone are the Elizabethan costumes and pretentious trappings of traditional Shakespeare. Instead, the entirely African-American cast drives around in a big purple Cadillac and hangs with characters like 8-ball and Sweet Daddy who love messing with the stuffed shirts in the audience.

Shakespeare has never been so accessible or so much fun. Nor has it ever sounded like this.

Busting at the seams with soul-shaking R&B and gospel, "Best of Both Worlds" boasts one of the most talented ensembles this area has ever seen. Whether it's the deep, moving sounds of Gregg Baker (Ezekiel), the mind-blowing vocal prowess of Jeannette Bayardelle (Serena) or the stirring, heartfelt sounds of Mary Bond Davis (Violetta), this production's going to have you jumping for joy.

'Best of Both Worlds'
Through Jan. 3
American Repertory Theater
Loeb Drama Center
64 Brattle St., Cambridge
MBTA: Red line to Harvard
\$25-\$75, 617-547-8300
▶ www.americanrepertorytheater.org

Nick Dussault

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