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arts

'Blast!' toots percussion section's own horn

By MAX McQUEEN

Get Out
Oct. 31, 2002

What do you get when you mix "Riverdance," "Stomp" and "Tap Dogs" with a drum and bugle corps? You get "Blast!" — and then some. Some? Well, there are 57 performers ages 21 to 33 on the Gammage stage. With that much youthful energy on one stage, the "Blast!" cast would be impressive if they were tiddling tiddlywinks. But artistic director James Mason's army of young people are not playing games: They're playing just about every percussion instrument known to modern and ancient man.

You haven't heard the didgeridoo until you've heard "Tangerinamadidge" tapped out by 22 musicians. Each gets a unique sound out of this oboelike instrument used for centuries by Australia's aborigines. This haunting segment is just one example of how world music and exotic instruments are used to broaden a show based on Middle America's high school marching bands. Those expecting two hours of John Philip Sousa are sure to be disappointed.

Instead, for two hours, Mason and director Jonathan Vanderkoff spend two acts pacing their troops through various musical styles and tones, doing their best to show the versatility of drums and horn sections. If "Blast!" has any major flaw, it is a certain sameness in the material, but when you're working with tubas, trombones, snare drums and the like, you can be sure such a show is going to be beat-driven.

The opening night crowd of Oct. 30 had no problem with "Blast!" being a supersize version of college and high school bands. In fact, from the high decibel level and frequent screaming of hundreds of junior high and senior high students, you would have thought Britney Spears herself had taken the Gammage stage. But no, it was just kids having a grand time watching musicians having as much fun as humanly possible with instruments usually relegated to the back of the stage.

Although Mason works hard to make sure "Blast!" remains starless, a handful of outstanding performers kept the Oct. 30 audience hooting and hollering its approval. Adam Rapa had the first showstopper with his trumpet solo on Maynard Ferguson's "Everybody Loves the Blues." The crowd went from supportive to frenzied as Kit Chatham and David Ellis engaged in a friendly drum-off, rat-tat-tatting snare drums at lightning speed.

After intermission, the entire cast gives a spirited Keystone Kop quality to "West Side Story's" "Gee, Officer Krupke," the show's sole nod to Broadway tunes. The last half of the second half finds the energetic ensemble syncopating to a heady blend of Latino and jazz influences on "Land of Make Believe" and "Malaguena."

Our favorite number in this fast-moving show is actually one of the slower segments: Aaron Copland's "Simple Gifts." This all-American anthem is usually the domain of an orchestra's string section. Amazingly enough, musical director James Prime has no trouble keeping this classic crisp, clean and deeply moving, even with every horn and drum trumpeting Copland's stirring ode to Middle America.

Thousands of playgoers saw "Blast!" in its Arizona premiere in January. Fans of that production will find an almost exact duplication in this tour. A return visit just 10 months later seems a bit risky if not redundant. But don't tell that to opening night's throng of teen musicians. They cheered each piece as if it were each selection's definitive drum-and-brass interpretation, a point that's tough to argue. If you like this kind of music, you won't find it played any better or packaged more creatively. But something tells us those who don't care for the big brass sound also might have a blast at "Blast!"

'Blast!'

Who:



When: 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday
Where: Gammage Auditorium, Apache Boulevard and Mill Avenue, Tempe
Cost: \$21.75-\$60.75
Information: (480) 965-3434
Grade: B
