

'Blast!' is a rowdy, joyous spectacle

By KEVIN NANCE
Staff Writer

Standing ovations are a common sight at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center's Broadway Series, but I've never seen one during a performance, much less one that was wholly deserved.

Never, that is, until the opening night of *Blast!*, the touring drum-and-bugle-corps Broadway extravaganza now making a brash and joyous racket at TPAC's Jackson Hall. With a potent combination of bravura musicianship, breathless prop-spinning and flawless precision drill meddled with sometimes frankly erotic choreography, the fresh-faced young cast held the audience rapt in a near-constant state of delirium.

Then, the production, as directed by James Mason, is nearly center-free. Never have I seen such electrifying showmanship put to the

service of such slender dramatic intent. *Blast!* is about nothing but itself and its ability to manipulate an audience with sound and movement and color. It also horrifies, sometimes, rather shamelessly, from its ancestors on the offbeat, touring-show circuit. *Stomp* and

Riverdance. No matter, I was helpless in the path of this visual and aural juggernaut which far outdoes its elders with youthful energy and cocky panache. Despite my usual old-foggy insistence that a night in the theater ought to offer more than spectacle, that it ought to mean something, I had an absolutely marvelous time.

The cast knocked my eyes out. Called from the top echelon of the nation's leading marching bands, drum corps and color guards, the performers aren't just great musicians, dancers, spinners and

twirlers; they're natural actors, comedians and flirts whose rapport with the audience is immediate and total. You haven't seen this many teeth and dimples since the last Miss America pageant, but those smiles never seem forced.

And as wholesomely all-American as the cast appears, its interpretation of Ray's *Boyz*, which opens the show, goes further than anything I've ever seen toward revealing the piece as the musical equivalent of sex. While never vulgar, its swiveling hips and pelvises, its ritualistic drum-beating, its slow ascent to triumphant, cymbal-crashing climax — will have you blushing and fanning yourself.

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Getting there

Blast!, a professional nonunion touring Broadway production, continues through Sunday at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center's Jackson Hall. Show times are 8 p.m. today, Friday, 2 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, 2 and 7:30 p.m. Sunday. For tickets, call 501-893-553, call 255-7787, or visit www.tpac.com. In a special arrangement between TPAC and Blast!, \$10 from every ticket will go to American Red Cross disaster relief efforts.

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As the focal point of the opening and closing segments, Chatham turns out to be the show's singular icon: a young man standing in the light, face flushed with joy, beating a drum as if his life depended on it, his life and ours. ■

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reaching the peak of the musical

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