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What a show! What a Blast!

Blast! 416/872-1212

Directed by James Mason. Choreography by Zoe Moore. Group Pinsent & Jonathan Vandenkoff. Until June 29 at the Hummingbird Centre, 1 Front St. E. ★★★★

By Richard Ouzounian
Theatre Critic

Imagine *Riverdance* with drums or *Cirque du Soleil* with brass. Add a world of whirling bassers, blazing lights and dazzling colour, then toss in over 50 energetic young performers.

Put all of that together and you'll start to get an idea of what *Blast!*, which opened at the Hummingbird Centre last night, is actually like. Part marching band, part colour guard, part music video — it's unrepentantly square and unabashedly old-fashioned.

The show has been in development since 1993. It started out as a tour with the Canadian Brass, grew throughout the American Midwest, opened in London in 1999, was filmed for PBS and finally hit Broadway in the spring of 2001, where it won a special Tony Award.

The hard part about *Blast!* is describing it; the easy part is enjoying it. If you go in looking for a carefully structured evening, or bring along a lot of baggage about what really constitutes "theatre," then you'll probably wind up shifting in your seat and grumbling.

There's no plot, no characterization, no socially redeeming message.

But if you sit back and just enjoy the tidal wave of talent cascading off the stage, you'll probably find yourself doing what I did: sitting there with a smile on my face, loving every minute.

The show begins with the cast spread out on two dozen raised boxes across the one aisle, across the front of the stage and blow you out of the water with their rendition of "Bolero." I was also knocked out by the performance of "Simple Gifts Appalachian Spring," where people clad in shirts the colour of a Granny Smith Apple gently sway and sing as they weave a spell that will bliss you right out.

You'll also love the duel to the death between drummers Nicolas Angelis and Kit Chatham, the slapstick hilarity of "Gee, Officer Krupke," or the spectacular light ballet they call "Lemontech."

And if you're still showing signs of resistance, the moment when the cast move through the audience as they charm you with "Land Of Make Believe" will shatter your final defences.

After that, you're easy prey for the take-no-prisoners finale, "Malaguena," with its sensual dancers (thank you Deborah Barrigan and Jessamah Hubert), pounding brass and more red hair than you've seen in years (than you've seen since the days of Chairman Mao).

Artistic Director James Mason has put together a package that is certainly slick, but its secret weapon is that underneath that veneer, you can still feel the beat of the American Heartland where it all began. The performers in this show are all intimately in love with what they do, and that is what elevates *Blast!* above other similar offerings.

If you wanted to carp or criticize, you could pick on the "Easy Listening Classics" aspect of the repertoire, the straight-from-the-Gap look of the cast, or the fact that ultimately you've just listening to a lot of marching band music in fancy dress.

But Mason and his creative colleagues (including Kitchener native Jonathan Vandenkoff, to whom Mason paid gracious on-stage tribute before the show begins last night) have created something that is definitely bigger than the sum of its parts.

When I saw it on Broadway last spring, I said "Blast! dazzles the eye, thrills the ear, and rivets the spirit."

It still does. Pay it a visit.

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