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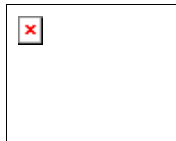
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Sarasota Herald-Tribune (FL)

Blues with abandon

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CHARLIE HUISKING charlie.huisking@heraldtribune.com

Dennis Courtney needs only a few words to define the blues.

"The blues is any feeling so large that it has to be expressed," he said. "You just can't hold it in." Joyous, painful and erotic feelings are expressed with abandon in "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues," the musical revue that opens Thursday at Florida Studio Theatre under Courtney's direction.

Backed by a blues band, a six-member cast will perform 40 songs, ranging from African chants and spirituals to Delta and Chicago blues numbers and country-flavored Appalachian music.

The list includes obscure songs as well as such standards as "Walkin' After Midnight," "Hootchie Kootchie Man," "Fever" and "Strange Fruit."

During the show's successful New York run in 1999, a *Newsday* critic described it as "the most stylish, most honest, most musically sophisticated revue since 'Ain't Misbehavin'" walked away with hearts and prizes in 1978."

The show charts the evolution of the blues from its African roots. Throughout the production, vintage photographs and sketches of slave auctions, Depression-era work crews, jam sessions and country churches are projected on a screen to put the music in context.

But the show is about as far as you can get from a history lesson or a dry, cerebral analysis of the blues genre, Courtney said.

"It's raw, extremely emotional experience," he said. "It's about feelings, not about thoughts. When I cast the show, I was looking for people who could find that raw, authentic place in themselves who would be comfortable being exposed "

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Cast member Jim Weaver said he's enjoyed the challenge and adventure of exploring many songs he hadn't encountered before.

"And Dennis is so great, because he gives you the path to go on, but he treats you as if you have a brain, and allows you to take a song where you feel it should go," Weaver said.

That's the only approach for a show like this, said Courtney, who noted that spontaneity is one of the hallmarks of the blues.

"That's why blues songs are full of non-sequiturs," he said. "Many of these songs were created when people were sitting around together in kitchens and fields. They sang what they were feeling at the moment. So you'll have subjects change in the middle of a song.

"And I love that the lyrics are so full of metaphors, so full of innuendo and sexuality. They could get away with things in these songs that they couldn't otherwise at that time."

In addition to Weaver, the cast of "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues" includes Joliet Harris, Jannie Jones, Richie McCall, Forrest Richards and Jon Rosen.

TICKETS

It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues

Opens at 8 p.m. Thursday after previews at 8 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, and runs through Dec. 3 at Florida Studio Theatre, 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota. Tickets are \$18 for previews, \$28 and \$30 other performances. Call 366-9000 or access www.fst2000.org.

Caption: COURTESY PHOTO / FST
Forrest Richards, Richie McCall and Jannie Jones star in "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues."
Jannie Jones

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