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CARNIVAL MESSIAH
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Carnival Messiah

West Yorkshire Playhouse,
Leeds

★★★★★

In the words of its creator, Geraldine Connor, Carnival Messiah is "a new cultural paradigm which establishes West Indian Carnival practice as a semiotic system of communication". Thankfully, it is rather better in practice than in theory.

To simplify, Carnival Messiah is the Bible to a calypso beat, a multicultural melee that snatches Handel's oratorio from the concert hall and sets it down in the middle of a Caribbean street festival. By the time word got round about how good it was when first performed two years ago, it was already impossible to get a ticket. Now there's no excuse for missing the party.

Feeding off the adrenaline of a huge mixed cast of professionals and community performers, Carnival Messiah is a heart-stopping surge of sound, sensation and colour topped off with a fine line in radical headgear. It is by far the best way to sample street carnival, with all the benefits of a good view and little chance of being caught up in any violence.

The musical preparation is exemplary. Purists who quake at the thought of Handel's work being performed by anything other than small forces on period instruments will undoubtedly have something to say about the steel band arrangement of the Hallelujah Chorus; but frankly, until you've heard the heavy dub version of For Unto Us a Child Is Born, you haven't lived.

Connor's direction turns the West Yorkshire Playhouse's huge Quarry stage into a teeming melting pot which frequently bubbles over into the audience. It is customary with Messiah for everyone to stand up during the Hallelujah Chorus. Here it is more a case of persuading people to sit down.

This isn't really a show about individuals, but Jean "Binta" Breeze brings her beatific presence to the role of Mama God and there are some excellent vocal performances from Brian Green, Nigel Wong and Ella Andall.

By the time Carnival Messiah comes to its explosive conclusion, the audience is on its feet and the cast virtually on their knees. You can't ask for much more than that.

Alfred Hickling

*Until July 27. Box office:
0113-213 7700.*