

THEATER

It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues

by David Anthony Fox

Though the season is less than half over, I confidently predict you will not see a more dazzlingly gifted ensemble than the seven featured performers -- Georgie Bonds, Doug Eskew, Joilet Harris, Barbara D. Mills, Sarah Jane Nelson, Jeffery V. Thompson and Scott Wakefield -- of *It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues*. Quite simply, they will blow you away.

To unfairly single out one performance among 38 fine ones, take "Someone Else Is Steppin' In," a naughty trifle that the sublime artistry of Ms. Mills turns into a four-minute theatrical event of the highest caliber. Mills -- and the rest of the *Blues* sisters and brothers -- should certainly be remembered at Barrymore Award time, and for years after.

As for the show itself, *Blues* is just what it promises -- a survey of the art in musical revue form. It's an inclusive overview, ranging from unaccompanied African chant to country western and R&B, and including both black and white musical styles. The arrangement of material alternates chronology with geography (Chicago blues, Mississippi blues and so on). There is a small amount of contextualizing historical narration, but for the most part the *Blues* creators are content to let the music speak for itself. They're quite right: Much of the first act feels like a cantata, and we welcome the uninterrupted focus.

Likewise, director Douglas C. Wager has the good taste to let the performers drive the show. Generally, they remain seated or standing in place. Behind them is a slide show of intriguing images (mostly photographs) that lends a sense of time and place. Act I has a somber feel to it, with material generally dealing with hard times and the cast in period "daytime dress"; in Act II, they break out in evening clothes, and kick up their heels.

There are a few obvious limitations. The Prince's plush surroundings de-fang some of the harsher material, and many of us will think of additional songs we wish they'd performed.

But when the cast takes to the stage -- augmented, I should hasten to add, by an excellent band led by William D. Jolly -- nothing else matters.

Blues will be bringing down packed houses through Nov. 23. Book your tickets now, and consider that you may well want to go more than once!

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Through Nov. 23, Prince Music Theater, 1412 Chestnut St., 215-569-9700