

Three Mo'Tenors Let The Good Times Roll!

BY ELLIOTT RICHARDS

Three Mo' Tenors is a joyful musical alchemy that makes you ask: Where are the great, young black tenors and why aren't they singing Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody"? Some of those terrific voices are now at Off-Broadway's Little Shubert Theatre and yes, they're singing the immortal lyrics, "I see a little silhouette of a man/Scaramouch, Scaramouch, will you do the fandango?"

Three Tenors—Luciano Pavarotti, Jose Carreras and Placido Domingo—perform at Dodger Stadium. Their repertoire was mostly opera and Broadway, but through their example, Caffey found a calling.

"When the icons segued from opera to Broadway, they came across as stiff in the Broadway numbers," Caffey recalled. "And I knew of African-American tenors who did lots of different styles."

But finding black tenors capable of moving effortlessly from "Rigoletto" to *Les Miserables*, from "Minnie the Moocher" to Ray Charles and from the O'Jays to the spiritual "Noways Tired" is not easy.

"Not many people can do what the show requires," Caffey said. "Out of 40, maybe one or two will actually fit the bill."

Caffey's chief requirement is that the singers be classically trained.

"Otherwise, it would be just three black men who can sing," he said. "There are many who sing a little bit of opera, but aren't classically trained. Most grew up singing other styles and then made the decision to study classical. But they never lost the ability to sing gospel or R&B."

Klausner, who produced the musical *Kat and the Kings* on Broadway in 1999, said that one of the intentions of *Three Mo'* is to provide a platform that black tenors can use to be more easily recognized by opera companies.

"Unfortunately, African-American tenors have been missing in the world of opera, versus sopranos and baritones," she said. "We're dealing with people whose ultimate goal is to get into the world of opera and we encourage them to succeed. We don't expect them to be with us forever."

Three Mo' starts off like a concert, in

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which one, two or three of the singers stand politely and sing Verdi's "La donna e mobile" and Puccini's "Nessun dorma." But the veneer of formality quickly fades.

All six singers move adeptly, whether they're channeling the Stylistics or embracing the beat of the South African song "Dali Wam." Caffey, the show's choreographer and director, said that none of the singers are "natural movers" but all are up to the challenge. "They take it on as fun, although it's not fun for them at first. Like all opera singers, they were used to standing in one place and singing in a spotlight."

Their rousing performances resonate with audiences. After Ramone Diggs sang the final note of "Who Can I Turn To" at one matinee, a woman in the audience, enthralled by his seductive performance and Smokey Robinson-like looks, called

out plaintively, "You gonna do it again?" "Another night," he quipped.

Three Mo' is all music with a little by-play between the singers; it is connected by its songs, not by a contrived tale of struggle and triumph. The notion of *Three Mo'* as a jukebox musical appalls Caffey. "What is the thing that killed more Broadway shows than anything else?" he asked. "The book. I think the story is there and it's told through the arc of the evening. We don't have to hammer home how hard African-American tenors have had it."

Klausner, who attends every performance when she's in town (her home is L.A.), hopes that Oprah Winfrey will notice the show and give it a high-profile boost of exposure.

"We feel we're the answer to, 'Do young men do anything but rap?'" she said.

** Solo numbers and the first act finale vary according to the cast, comprised of either Kenneth D. Alston, Jr., Ramone Diggs and Phumzile Sojola or James N. Berger, Jr., Duane A. Moody and Victor Robinson. Sean Miller is the standby for both casts.*



Photo: Aaron Eisenberg

Kenneth Alston, Jr., Ramone Diggs, Phumzile Sojola

Dressed elegantly, three black tenors—two casts alternate the week's eight-show schedule*—move from one genre to another: opera to soul, Broadway to R&B, jazz to gospel, rock to South African music (befitting the background of performer Phumzile Sojola).

"I see this show as a gift from black America to all of the world," said Willette Murphy Klausner, the show's sole producer. "It takes people on a journey from where we've been to where we are, to where we're going."

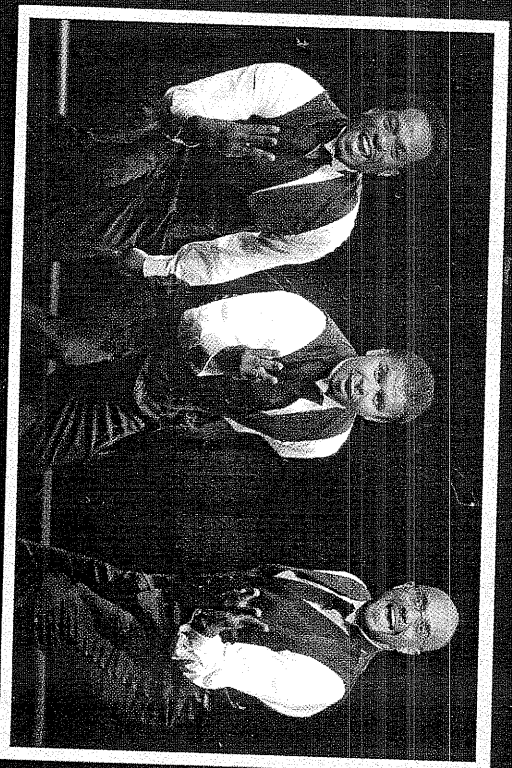
It is the creation of Marion J. Caffey, who was inspired by watching the original



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