

Review: Sister Act

By Holly Wigmore

***Sister Act* at Theatre Royal Plymouth**

You've probably heard of the original 1992 comedy film starring Whoopi Goldberg, but it was in 2006 when lyricist Alan Menken first brought this superior narrative to the stage; turning it into a production brimming with comedy. Director Bill Buckhurst can be credited for creating a visually outstanding performance that had the audience chortling throughout, whilst the story unfolded.

This comedic crime musical takes place in Philadelphia in the late 1970s, telling the story of Deloris Van Cartier (Sandra Marvin), an aspiring singer and disco diva who's first introduced when auditioning for her gangster boyfriend Curtis' (Jeremy Secomb) nightclub. She believes he's going to introduce her to a big-time producer; but is crushed to hear the news he thinks she isn't ready for stardom. Disheartened by this news, she goes to break up with him but ends up witnessing the murder of one of his cronies, immediately running to the police with this information.

As Curtis seeks his revenge on Deloris, it's decided that she'll hide in a convent for protection, which Deloris first deems impossible; leaving the outside world in exchange for a religious life, but when she meets the struggling convent choir, her perspective changes, becoming part of their *Sister Act*. Her sisters surround her with alternative morals, giving her a sense of genuine love, attention and affection she was missing prior to meeting them, giving her a true sense of belonging; with her repayment being saving the choir and therefore the convent too. This narrative resulted in a joyous, uplifting tale that the entire audience enjoyed, with deserving praise.

Sandra Marvin made a superb Deloris, complete with powerhouse vocals and diva attitude, first entering the convent with far from Catholic morals. Her mannerisms were that of a streetwise city girl, which came as a complete culture shock for her fellow sisters; having strayed from her original Catholic beginnings. But as her sisters grounded her to reality; the audience were treated to her softer side, as a woman who craved a sense of genuine love and belonging that she'd not received before; allowing for a feel-good performance from Marvin.

Her vocals were undoubtedly the strongest within the cast, having ballads such as '*Fabulous Baby!*' acting as her introduction and dream of stardom as a quintessential 70s disco diva, '*Raise Your Voice*' when first mentoring the struggling choir and teaching them her ways, and the titular '*Sister Act*' when reflecting on her relationship with her fellow sisters. Each of Deloris' songs allowed a diverse performance that allowed Marvin to shine as an actress, under the heavenly glow of the spotlights; making her a performer you couldn't take your eyes off of, redefining this classic character.

The entire ensemble were collectively astonishing, in particular Graham Macduff as lieutenant Eddie Souther, nicknamed by Deloris as '*Steady Eddie*', as this duo met at high school; with Eddie having an undeniable crush on Deloris throughout the years.

Macduff's performative nature was arguably the most comedic from the cast, being clumsy and self-doubting surrounding his job within the police, being too timid to even shoot his own gun. He was seen as an undynamic individual who simply wanted to protect Deloris, that is until his solo number of '*I Could Be That Guy*'.

Within this musical number, Eddie allowed his charismatic nature to shine, pondering about his life with Deloris and what he can do to make her see that he's worth her time outside of his job role in protecting her. Turning the police station into his own stage, Eddie has a dream sequence, matching Deloris' upbeat energy where he's stripped of his uniform in a quick change; stepping up onto his desk in a black and white glitter disco suit where he expresses if he could change his ways; maybe he'd be seen in a different light by her, performed comedically by Macduff.

But this dream sequence doesn't last long, with him once again being stripped of this outfit back into his uniform; equalling in a total of two quick-changes. Returning to reality, he struggles to get down from his desk, wobbling on a set of boxes in order to reach the floor. Macduff adds a sense of resonance with any audience member who's tried their hardest to impress anyone before, whilst presenting this in an entertaining and light-hearted nature that made the audience undeniably grin whenever he stepped onto stage.

Within the convent of nuns, Lizzie Bea as Sister Mary Robert was undeniably my standout favourite supporting actress. Being the youngest of the sisters, she was incredibly naive to the outside world and looked up to Deloris because of this; becoming a shining role. Starting off quiet and timid, she quickly found her voice; ending up becoming one of the loudest voices in the choir, lamenting this in her emotive solo number '*The Life I Never Led*'.

As a collective convent, the cast were truly remarkable when it came to company numbers such as '*Raise Your Voice*' and '*Spread The Love Around*' where Deloris brought new life into the choir.

Set design, created by Morgan Large was truly heavenly; making use of several locations, including: The sisters' convent, Curtis' nightclub, the police station and The 9th Circle Bar (*cleverly named after Dante's Inferno as the ninth circle of hell is the centre where the worst punishments are found, with this being a polar opposite to the morals of the sisters*), all of which had seamless scene changes throughout.

The stage itself was designed around a traditional cathedral window; seen countless in religious culture, tying this in with the strong traditional themes of the narrative. Whilst this was a permanent part of the staging, un-religious locations such as the police station were smoothly created, simply bringing in collections of stacked boxes that made the scene look like a manic hub of police who were continuously working on cases. These boxes were double sided and also created a cityscape that was used occasionally to represent the outside city; for example when Deloris was first fleeing from the scene of the crime; making Large's set design effortlessly fantastic, adding to the narrative structure without distraction.

When the scenes in the convent were taking place, the outside of the staging; made to look like the church window, was often illuminated with either bright whites (*resonating with religion*) or vibrant blues, pairing well with the gothic stone structures that were brought in to present the religious atmosphere. These effects were only made possible through the addition of an extraordinary lighting design, created by Tim Mitchell.

Mitchell's lighting design was highly effective with the implementation of several effects, including but not limited to: Spotlights, glitterballs, multicoloured lights (*built into the stage*) and LEDs (*within the stone walls of the church*). Traditional theatrical spotlights were a key aspect of the lighting within *Sister Act*, but not only did they act to highlight solo performers; but doubled up as a light from Heaven as if the sky was shining down upon them, cleverly constructing the usage to intertwine with the events of the storyline.

The built in LEDs were used productively, being used as a stage backdrop for Deloris' performances, even before she joined the convent. However, with the design of this being traditionally gothic, it made for a versatile piece of set used collectively by Mitchell & Large. The stage itself had a plentiful colour scheme, being used joyfully in the final number of '*Raise Your Voice (Reprise)*' where a rainbow colour palette was implemented to match the sisters' coloured glittery dresses; worn when fully embracing Deloris' impact to the choir after the final curtain call.

Stage lighting was bounced off a glitterball, which linked to Deloris' disco diva persona and was used often in both versions of '*Fabulous Baby!*', both in her opening number and the reprise with her sisters. The use of this allowed the audience to also be lit up as the glitterball twirled, adding a sense of overall glitz and glamour to Deloris' performances and this, alongside the use of the built-in stage lights made the whole performance very light-hearted and a joy to watch.

Sister Act isn't a show to be missed this festive period. By adapting the iconic Goldberg original film into a jovial musical, it truly deserves to be blessed for its performative nature. Whether an existing fan of the original or not, it's a musical that'll undoubtedly raise your spirits, allowing an ensemble to come together and truly make you beam. There's no doubt you'll be humming along to the tracks as you're leaving the theatre feeling *Fabulous Baby!*