

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

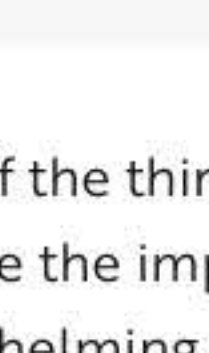
Cabrillo Stage's 'Sister Act' strives to finds its soul



BY JANA MARCUS

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A talented cast gives its all, but uneven direction, sluggish pacing and a surprisingly forgettable score keep Cabrillo Stage's "Sister Act" from reaching the joyous heights the musical promises, Jana Marcus writes in her latest theater review.

One of the things I love most about musicals is that they often ask audiences to believe the impossible. At the right moment, emotions become so overwhelming that characters can no longer simply speak. They have to sing.

Recently, "Hamilton" creator Lin-Manuel Miranda mentioned why he loves musicals. He talked about the love and heart audiences feel when they hear a story they can relate to. The music becomes an extension of the story, carrying us along because we care deeply about the characters on stage.

If you go

Who: Cabrillo Stage

What: "Sister Act"

When: Through Aug. 2

Where: Crocker Theater, 6500 Soquel Dr., Aptos

Tickets: [Click here](#)

That's what I kept thinking about during Cabrillo Stage's production of "Sister Act."

Based on the popular 1992 film starring Whoopi Goldberg, "Sister Act" follows aspiring nightclub singer Deloris Van Cartier after she witnesses her gangster boyfriend commit a murder. Hidden by police inside a struggling Philadelphia convent, Deloris reluctantly trades sequins for a nun's habit before transforming the convent's hopeless choir into an unlikely musical sensation. Along the way, she discovers friendship, purpose and a family she never expected to find.

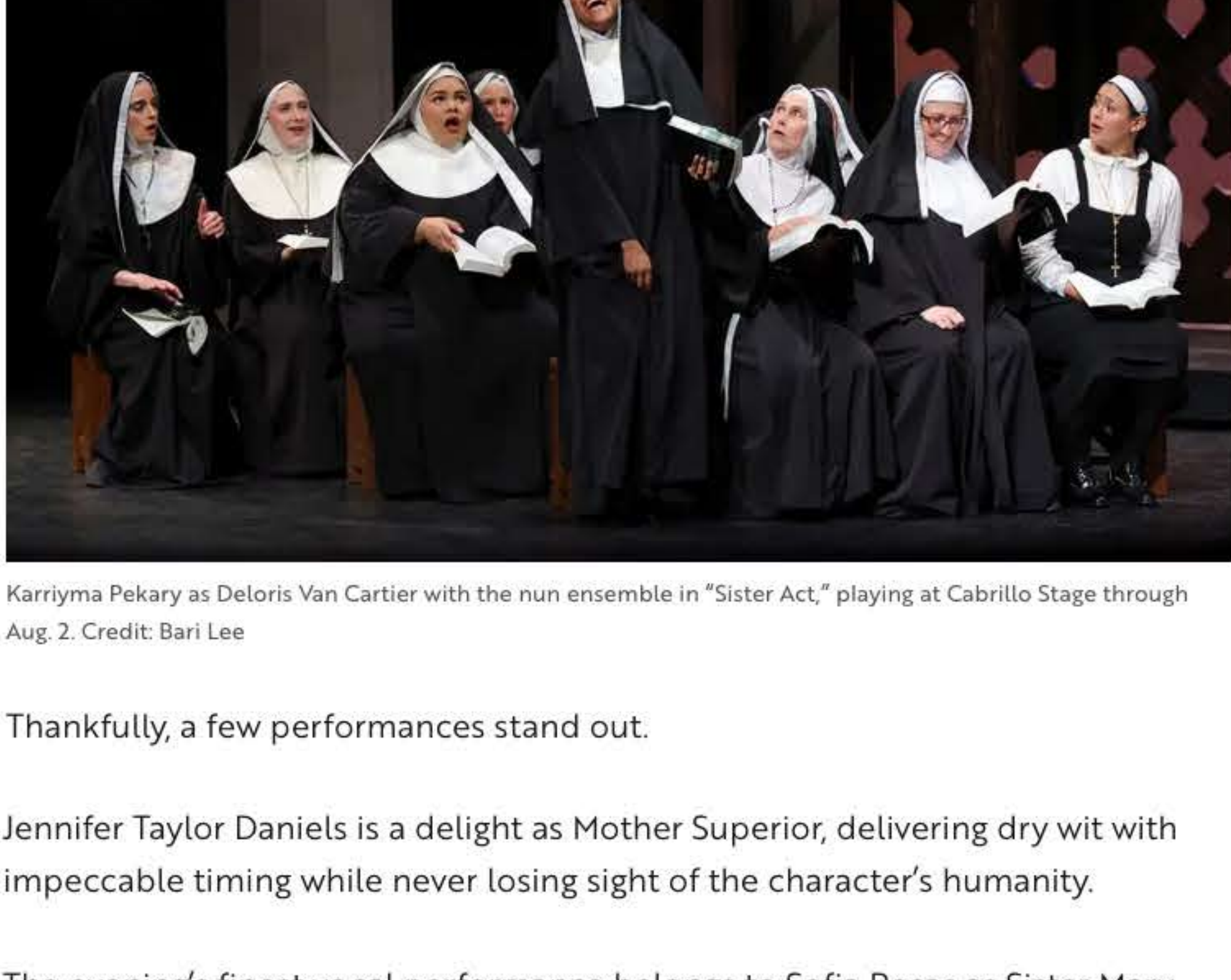
It's a premise that should be irresistible. Unfortunately, the stage adaptation of the film never fully lives up to it.

Featuring music by Alan Menken, lyrics by Glenn Slater and a book by Cheri and Bill Steinkellner, "Sister Act" premiered in London's West End in 2009 before moving to Broadway two years later. While it proved successful in London and earned five Tony Award nominations, I find this to be one of Menken's least memorable scores. This is the composer who gave us "Beauty and the Beast," "The Little Mermaid" and "Newsies." By comparison, few songs from "Sister Act" linger once the curtain falls.

That means the production itself has to provide the energy and emotional connection that the score often doesn't have.

As I watched opening night, I found myself surprisingly torn.

There is a tremendous amount of talent on the stage. Every performer is fully committed, and it's obvious the cast is working incredibly hard. But this became one of those frustrating evenings when gifted actors simply couldn't overcome material that never quite catches fire.



Karriyma Pekary as Deloris Van Cartier with the nun ensemble in "Sister Act," playing at Cabrillo Stage through Aug. 2. Credit: Bari Lee

Thankfully, a few performances stand out.

Jennifer Taylor Daniels is a delight as Mother Superior, delivering dry wit with impeccable timing while never losing sight of the character's humanity.

The evening's finest vocal performance belongs to Sofia Rosas as Sister Mary Robert. Her soaring voice brings genuine emotion to every number she sings and reminds us what this musical is capable of when heart and performance finally align.

Comic relief arrives courtesy of the three bumbling henchmen – Aschlyn Ahrens, Arjun Medhekar and Carlos Joel Gonzalez – who nearly steal the evening with their wonderfully campy rendition of "Lady in the Long Black Dress." Their scenes provide some of the biggest laughs of the night.

It was also a pleasure seeing longtime Cabrillo Stage favorite David Jackson return as Eddie Souther. His rich, velvety singing voice remains one of the company's most dependable musical assets.

Karriyma Pekary makes an appealing Deloris Van Cartier, bringing warmth, humor and flashes of infectious personality to the role. Her streetwise dialect is charming, although it gradually disappears as the evening progresses. I also found myself wishing she had been directed to command the stage more aggressively in the first act. She has the charisma. She simply needs the production to unleash it.

The show's broad, formulaic storytelling leans heavily into caricature rather than character. Bobby Marchessault embraces the comic-book villainy of Curtis Jackson, while much of the convent humor depends on the novelty of nuns rapping, dancing and behaving unexpectedly. The audience around me clearly enjoyed those moments, but for me, the jokes quickly became predictable, and the show never found the emotional depth needed for the comedy to truly resonate.

Musical theater has its own vocabulary. It's not simply acting with songs. It demands performers who can command the stage with confidence, physicality and an unmistakable sense of presence. While the principal cast generally succeeds, a handful of supporting performances never fully settle into that heightened style.



Jennifer Taylor Daniels as Mother Superior with the nun ensemble in Cabrillo Stage's production of "Sister Act." Credit: Bari Lee

Throughout much of "Sister Act," I never felt like I was participating in the journey with Deloris. I felt like I was observing it. That comes down to staging. Director Rebecca Haley Clark never quite finds the pulse that keeps a musical moving.

Too many scenes are played upstage against bare sets, leaving one or two performers isolated on a huge stage while singing songs that already struggle to create much emotional momentum.

Rather than drawing us closer, the staging often pushes us away. We see this in several numbers such as Pekary singing "Sister Act" or Marchessault and his thugs singing "When I Find My Baby." They seem to get devoured by the amount of empty space around them.

Visually, set designer Scott Boynton's church interior is vast yet inviting, providing the production's strongest scenic environment. Once the action leaves the convent, however, much of the show unfolds before sparse scenery that offers audiences little to engage with beyond the performers themselves.

The pacing doesn't help.

Drama can thrive on long silences. Musicals rarely can. Again and again, conversations pause between lines without dramatic purpose, draining scenes of their rhythm. Moments that should sparkle begin to feel labored. Even transitions between scenes seem to stall the momentum.

Babe Payne's choreography suffers from many of the same issues. Much of it relies on familiar formations and predictable synchronized arm movements that rarely build excitement or surprise. The dancing illustrates the songs rather than elevating them.

The costume design proves more puzzling. During a scene when the nuns sneak into Deloris' room in the middle of the night, they are wearing full habits over brightly colored satin pajamas in maroon, green and pink. Do nuns actually sleep in their habits? And why are they wearing colorful pajamas?

And someone please call PETA about the fox draped around Curtis Jackson's shoulders. It belongs to Mildred Pierce in the 1940s, not a gangster.

By the time the finale arrives, the production is asking the audience to feel a level of exhilaration it hasn't quite earned. Cast members move into the aisles, encouraging the audience to clap along, but the number never becomes the roof-raising gospel celebration it desperately wants to be.

One final observation isn't directed at this production at all, but at the Crocker Theater itself. The acoustics remain one of the venue's most persistent shortcomings. From seats in the orchestra section the sound is often overly bright in the treble range, making song lyrics surprisingly difficult to understand. After nearly two decades, it's a longstanding issue that still deserves attention.

As I left the theater, I paused in the lobby to look over Cabrillo Stage's display celebrating the company's 45th anniversary.

Instead of feeling nostalgic, I found myself feeling unexpectedly reflective.

The small display celebrates the company's longevity, yet I was surprised that little to no attention was given to the artistic leaders of the past whose visions transformed Cabrillo Stage into one of the area's most respected musical theater companies.

Founding artistic director Lile Cruse built the foundation. Skip Epperson guided the company through an important transition before Jon Nordgren spent 16 years expanding Cabrillo Stage into the ambitious multishow company that so many theater lovers came to admire.

Every theater company stands on the shoulders of those who came before it.

Remembering that history isn't simply about honoring the past. It's about remembering the artistic standards they worked so hard to establish.

Over the past few seasons, reading production biographies and interviewing members of creative teams, I've noticed more productions being led by artists who are just starting to build their experience in major musical theater design roles. There is value in that. Every accomplished director, choreographer, and designer deserves an opportunity to grow.

But Cabrillo College already fulfills that mission through its excellent Theatre Arts department during the academic year.

Historically, Cabrillo Stage pursued a different goal. It aspired to produce the highest-quality musical theater possible by pairing exceptional local and Bay Area performers with seasoned artistic leadership. Those goals don't have to compete with one another, but "Sister Act" feels like a production where polish has given way to process.

The irony is that the talent is already here. This cast proves it.

Opening night's audience clearly enjoyed themselves, and many patrons will undoubtedly leave smiling throughout the run.

I suspect I'll be in the minority. What seems to be missing is the artistic cohesion that transforms talented individual performances into unforgettable musical theater experiences.

A critic's job isn't simply to celebrate what works. It's also to ask what a production might have been. For me, that question lingered far longer than any of the songs.