

Carnival Messiah, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds, until October 16. Box office: 0113 213 7700.

CARNIVAL Messiah scatters the exuberant pageantry of Trinidadian Carnival over the rich musical seed bed of Handel's Messiah. A riotous blaze of colour blooms, not with the trim tidiness of municipal gardens, but something altogether wilder, more joyous and exhilarating.

If the medieval York Cycle of Mystery Plays is our city's pinnacle of community theatre, then Carnival Messiah's bang-up-to-date celebration of the life of Christ is the most thrilling, multi-cultural spiritual experience to be savoured on the eve of the Millennium: a show that puts Chapelton into the chapel while leaving Jesus Christ Superstar looking as Seventies as the Bay City Rollers.

Conceived, adapted and directed by Geraldine Connor - who also wrote all the musical arrangements - this world premiere sprang from workshops at Wakefield Opera House in 1994 and the West Yorkshire Playhouse a year later. The 1999 version, brought to the stage by the Playhouse, Carnival Messiah Limited and Bretton Hall College, is a magical roundabout of song, dance and Caribbean storytelling, performed by a company drawn from the world of theatre, opera, dance and the nightclub, complemented by a buoyant chorus of community players.

Connor applies the ebullience of Caribbean pantomime to re-tell the story of Christ, with the aid of

REVIEW

seven minstrels, led by Ram John Holder, Jean Binta Breeze's Mama God and a masquerade of more than 100 community performers, dancing and singing with abandon. How Busby Berkeley and Bob Fosse would love the audacity, epic scale and merry-go-round-whirl of Carol La Chapelle's choreography.

Clary Salandy's masquerade and costume designs are worth the admission price alone. In all, 1,000 costumes dazzle in a palate of colours that would make even a meadow of butterflies jealous. From temple headgear to magnificent winged creations to adaptations of club and street fashion, Salandy waves a magic wand to conjure a clothes show from somewhere over the rainbow. Paradise with a West Yorkshire postal address.

If the costumes are this production's peak, the music makes your heart leap. Everything but the proverbial kitchen sink is thrown

into the melting pot in a new handle on Handel's oratorio, with a community band, choir and steel band (for Hallelujah) playing their part. Twice Anne Fridal's Mary hits the operatic heights, and Brian Green's He Was Despised and Ronald Samm's I Know That My



Jean Binta Breeze as Mama God

Redeemer Liveth are breathtaking, but it is Connor's vibrant use of jazz, Bhangra, Calypso, reggae, soca, gospel, African, rock and hip hop that light up the night like shooting stars.

This Messiah could be more focused, the storytelling is under-used, and Tom Briggs-Davis's Ragga Storyteller is too like the Blues Brothers, but Hallelujah what a night. Don't stop the Carnival Messiah!