

JOAN MARCUS

"The Book of Mormon" continues through Sunday at the Peace Center.

'Book of Mormon' funny, offensive

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"The Book of Mormon" is going to offend you.

Whether it's a concept or an action or the explicit language, you are almost certain to be offended, or at least find yourself cringing, at some point during the show.

But, even more than that, it will make you laugh. And it will make you feel like dancing, and make you laugh some more, and, finally, make you rise to your feet to give it a well-deserved standing ovation.

Returning to the Peace Center this week after a sold-out run in 2014, "The Book of Mormon" is top-notch entertainment and one of the funniest nights of musical theater you will ever see. Don't make the mistake of missing it.

The show chronicles the travels of two eager young Mormon missionaries, Elder Price (a terrific Gabe Gibbs) and Elder Cunningham (marvelously played by standby Chad Burris at the Wednesday performance). The mismatched pair are sent not to Orlando (the prayed-for preference of Elder Price) but to Uganda, where they quickly discover that "Africa is not like 'The Lion King.'" Soon they meet Mafala (Tyrone L. Robinson) and his daughter, Nabulungi (Bryce Charles) as well as other missionaries already stationed there, including Elder McKinley (a hilarious Eric Huffman).

While the missionaries do their best to happily spread their message, they meet resistance in the face of a population suffering from malnutrition, disease, and the ritual practices of a local warlord (Oge Agulué). With some creative effort on the part of Elder Cunningham, they may make some converts after all.

The score is full of highlights, from the exuberant opening number "Hello!" and the hilarious act-one closer "Man Up" to the outrageous "Hasa Diga Eebowai" and show-stopping "I Believe." Musical-theater aficionados will also enjoy the nods to other classics such as "The Sound of Music," "Annie," and "The Lion King" that are not-so-subtly weaved into the show.

The performers on Wednesday night, which featured several understudies taking leading roles, were uniformly excellent. Gibbs is dynamite as Elder Price, with a megawatt smile and dynamic energy that perfectly fits the role. Charles displayed charm, warmth and an amazing voice as Nabulungi, and Burris won over the crowd both onstage and off as the nerdy Elder Cunningham.

While these talented performers made the show sing, plenty of credit still goes to the original creative team, including "South Park" creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, and Bobby Lopez, the Oscar-winning composer of "Frozen" and "Avenue Q," who together wrote the book, music and lyrics.

Additionally, Casey Nicholaw's choreography earns its own laughs — and cheers — while simultaneously paying homage to the history of musical theater. In many ways, "The Book of Mormon" is a very traditional musical, following a language and structure that's practically embedded in a theatergoer's heart. And within that sturdy framework, the creators are free to stretch their language and ideas to scathingly hilarious heights.

In its profane heart, the show preaches a beautiful message about the power of metaphor and the way stories can bring people together to make impactful changes right here today. And if you sometimes end up mixing in a bit of "Star Wars" with your theology, well, that's OK. Just be thankful you don't have maggots...

The Book of Mormon runs through Sunday at the Peace Center. Tickets are $45-$125. For reservations and showtimes, call the box office at 864-467-3000 or visit www.peacecenter.org. Contains explicit language.