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MUSIC

MUSIC; Down-Home And Bluesy But All New

By BARRY SINGER

THE blues does not lend itself easily to musicals. Its storytelling capacity may be limitless, but the blues's stark simplicity does not comfortably share musical theater's expansive way with a story. Where theater music is ingratiating, always reaching out to its audience, the blues is self-contained, unyielding.

This is probably why "Thunder Knocking on the Door," a show that opened recently at the Minetta Lane Theater in Greenwich Village to mixed reviews, is perhaps the first original blues musical since the 1920's to reach even an Off Broadway stage. "Thunder Knocking" is not a compendium of old gutbucket favorites, like Broadway's "It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues" (1999) or "Blues in the Night" (1988). It is a book musical with a blues score written from scratch by Keb' Mo', the two-time Grammy Award-winning, new age bluesman, along with the show's librettist, Keith Glover, and a second composer-lyricist, Anderson Edwards.

"Thunder Knocking" is a family fable about a widowed mother and her son and daughter in rural Alabama in 1966, their blues legacy, and the supernatural blues icon, Marvell Thunder, who threatens to wrest it from them. Though the production is often overwhelmed by heavy-handed touches of magic realism, what stands out is the clutch of gritty, guitar-driven blues originals that alternate with more generic, contemporary R & B-style ballads. These songs achieve something new in musical theater, advancing the plot almost as surely as anything by Rodgers and Hammerstein while managing to sound searingly authentic.

The declamatory muscle of the music makes it particularly well-suited to establishing character. "Thunder Knocking" uses traditional blues bluster to define in a few sharp words who each character is and what he wants. When the salt of the earth Dregster Dupree sings "Believe Me" to his widowed sister-in-law, Good Sister Dupree, we learn all we need to know about him: "Baby, please/ Please believe me / I can't tell you no lie,/ Your love has been my water/ Don't let the river run dry/ I learned to love you before I was born, / I just can't leave you alone."

What the Good Sister sings in reply says everything about the limits of their long-suffering relationship: "I'm doing the best that I can,/ Forgive me baby if I take too long, / You're as fine

a man as I've ever known/ But I got to make it, baby, on my own."

"Thunder Knocking," Keb' Mo' recalled, started out with a score made up entirely of covers of old blues songs played by a live band. "Keith Glover wanted original blues songs, though," Keb' Mo' said. "And so he approached me. I wrote six when the show was being done at Yale about five years ago; I'd write a song and then I'd leave. I wrote based on the moment, based on what I felt. It was Keith who had the play in mind, and he'd modify what I'd written, make the lyrics reflect the dialogue. I'd worked in theater before as an actor, and I love working in the theater, but this is the first time I've ever composed for the theater."

Eighty years ago, when the blues was in its heyday, a parade of blues musicals reached Broadway with books far less ambitious than that of "Thunder Knocking." Shows like "Bottomland," "Deep Harlem," "Messin' Around" and "Pansy" featured scores by legends like Clarence Williams, Joe Jordan, Perry Bradford, James P. Johnson and Maceo Pinkard. At the time, no one worried much about integrating songs into the plot. That was a lesson Broadway was not to learn until "Show Boat" in 1927 and then "Oklahoma!" in 1943.

A blues book musical poses particular hazards, however, and Keb' Mo' and his collaborators seem to have understood this. "I have an appreciation for straight-up Broadway," Keb' Mo' said. "But I also didn't want anything too show-tuney. I really wanted to just do what I do. I take the raw blues, which is at the root of our American culture, and expand on it. The blues is about being real. And a musical onstage is about being fake. My job was to make sure we never strayed too far from down-home."

Thunder Knocking on the Door

Minetta Lane Theater,

18 Minetta Lane, Greenwich Village.

Photo: Peter Jay Fernandez as Marvell Thunder, a blues guitarist with supernatural powers.
(Joan Marcus)