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Satisfying the Spirit

Rev. Nolan Williams, Jr.'s "Christmas Gift!" is a History Lesson, Spiritual Uplift and an Eye-Popping Show

By Archana Pyati/Photos by Sheila Peake

In one sense, Christmas for African-American slaves was a day like any other, filled with back-breaking labor and obligations to the master's family before one's own. Slaves might've received leisure time with their loved ones, but a holiday was never guaranteed. Yet, enslaved families still managed to inject joy and a spirit of giving into the day, creating their own traditions, many of which have since been forgotten.



One of those rituals was a game called "Christmas Gift," where two people would compete to see who could present a gift to the other quicker and cry "Christmas Gift!" first. It paid to come in second in this game; losing, however, meant something equally special: the act of giving presents, usually a homemade item, validated and intensified bonds of love between family and friends who didn't know when their next celebration together would happen.

A new musical revue developed by **Rev. Nolan Williams, Jr.** resurrects the Christmas Gift game, drawing on the wide range of musical styles, genres, and literary works from the African-American canon. The Dec. 14 performance, titled "Christmas Gift!," was a mishmash of sorts with gospel numbers leading to jazzy arrangements of Christmas carols to recitations of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes poems to griot-style story-telling. Add to the mix a live jazz band, the glorious Voices of Inspiration choir, African drummers, and step dancers who create geometrical shapes with their bodies.

The show's stardust came in the form of gospel and R&B favorites Shirley Murdock and John Stoddart [view more performance photos [here](#)].

The whole thing works because Williams—as the show's creator, conductor, emcee, and head cheerleader—exudes the enthusiasm of a child on Christmas morning. He stumbled upon the Christmas Gift story in a book by Chicago librarian and author Charlemagne Hill Rollins, who played a critical role in documenting slave history. Developing the show over the past decade, Williams sought out other texts—including short essays by W.E.B. duBois and Zora Neale Hurston—and songs to supplement Rollins' vision.



"I was interested in weaving a story that would reflect the diversity of our traditions," Williams, the music minister at Metropolitan Baptist Church, said during a post-show audience Q & A session. With this production, Williams knew he wanted to break away from the standard Christmas fare, especially to honor lost histories of African-Americans. "The easiest thing to do is what everyone is doing," he said. "But it's harder to break through the status quo."

The show moved at an exciting pace during Friday night's performance at the Clarice Smith Performing Center at the University of Maryland with the audience not knowing what to expect next. Williams' own composition, "Christmas Gift," was the centerpiece of the show's first half. A Caribbean-flavored sing-a-long, the tune expresses the true meaning of Christmas, sacrificed over the years to the gods of commerce and materialism. Here's the bridge: "This Christmas I will simplify/Lift Jesus name and message high/This Christmas I will share my wealth/Of time and love; I'll give myself."

The entire stage was turned into a dreamy jazz club under a starry night during Stoddart's interpretation of "Silent Night," a far cry from the one sung in every elementary school Christmas recital from Maine to Alaska. Williams took Joseph Mohr's text, added words of his own, and dispensed with Franz Gruber's music to create a refreshing, almost cabaret rendition of this old chestnut.

Voices of Inspiration continued the jazzy theme with its gorgeous version of "What Child is This?," set to a Dave Brubeck-inflected "Greensleeves," while Murdock concluded the first half with her gospel blowout "Some Children See Him," a song about seeing the Christ child in all babies regardless of their skin color. Murdock didn't hold back on the colorful melismas, earning rave reviews from the audience.

The second half of "Christmas Gift!" started out with a bang with Williams' Kwanzaa Suite, a genre-mixing piece that combined an intensely rhythmic step routine, spoken word poetry, and a Dixieland-style Kwanzaa chant. Once



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again, Williams inserted his values into a catchy tune without sounding preachy. The song celebrates key concepts of Kwanzaa—unity (“imoja”), self-determination (“kujichagulia”) and collective responsibility (“ujima”)—with an audience call-and-response.

The show’s grand finale weaved a funky version of the spiritual “Go, Tell it on the Mountain” with a reprise of “Christmas Gift,” bringing the audience to their feet. Dancers, musicians, steppers, story-tellers, and vocalists all crowded the stage to close out an evening of spiritually satisfying entertainment.



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