

The Book of Mormon's national touring cast, with Mark Evans (FRONT CENTER) and Christopher John O'Neill (FAR RIGHT), brings the irreverent musical to Fort Lauderdale.



Men on a Mission

THE BOOK OF MORMON BLOWS INTO SOUTH FLORIDA, BRINGING WITH IT A SURPRISING MIX OF HUMOR AND HEART. BY PATTY ADAMS MARTINEZ

Nearly three years and nine Tony wins after *The Book of Mormon* opened on Broadway, *South Park* creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker, along with *Avenue Q* composer Robert Lopez, are bringing their campy look at the Mormon faith to Fort Lauderdale's Broward Center for the Performing Arts. To sum up Parker and Stone's work, it's always hilarious, usually offensive, and never dull. The same can be said of *The Book of Mormon's* two hours and 15 minutes of nonstop laughter.

The musical, which includes catchy tunes like "Man Up" and "Spooky Mormon Hell Dream," is about two Salt Lake City teenagers setting out on their almighty mission to convert the people of Uganda to Mormonism. "There's a catharsis in being able to laugh at some of the goofier ideas of religion without necessarily laughing at the people practicing them," explains cocreator Stone.

And, yes, there are the requisite gay jokes, profanity, and what some may call blasphemous commentary on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, but what you might

not expect from the brains behind *South Park* is a story with heart.

"Once you get past the F-words, the show is really about spreading goodwill and being a good person," says 31-year-old Christopher John O'Neill, who plays Elder Cunningham, the bumbling, *Star Wars*-loving geek who is more focused on making his first friend than more church members. "It's less about being a Mormon as the show goes on, and more about faith in general—which all people can relate to."

Elder Cunningham is paired with Elder Price, played by Mark Evans, 28, who has been singing, dancing, and acting since he was a preteen. "Elder Price has the chiseled, all-American looks and is considered the perfect Mormon specimen," Evans says. "The two must go off on a two-year mission to Uganda, where they are confronted with war, poverty, famine, and AIDS—not at all what Elder Price was hoping for." In fact, he was praying he would be assigned to Orlando, Florida, "the happiest place on earth."

But according to the principal touring cast, they

are much more excited to visit Fort Lauderdale—one of the national tour's longer residences at four weeks—than the House of Mouse. Evans can't wait to hit the surf and sand in Fort Lauderdale ("Our hotel is beachfront!") and nearby Miami, while O'Neill's foodie wife will be mapping out the best restaurants for them to dine at during their eight-shows-a-week schedule.

Interestingly enough, the musical's South Florida debut will come just months before the Fort Lauderdale Florida Temple, the first Mormon Temple in the area, is slated to open in Davie, which is expected to serve 28,000 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

To quote Parker: "There's just nothing more perfect in the universe than a good musical. And a bad musical makes you want to kill yourself." In this case, the audience should be safe and sound—and on its feet—by the end of the show. *The Book of Mormon* runs through December 22 at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, 201 SW Fifth Ave., Fort Lauderdale, 954-462-0222. **OD**