

'Thunder' is jaw-dropping production

But Act I ruined by heavy script

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The Keb' Mo' hits just keep on coming in the second act of "Thunder Knocking on the Door," a blues musical fable that gets a rock concert staging at Playhouse in the Park.

That man can write the blues (with Anderson Edwards), and this outrageously good cast of five can sing them, backed by a band who feel the music in their bones. Great work by music director Michael Leroy Peed. Show creator Keith Glover also gets a credit for additional music and lyrics.

The production, the season finale in the Marx, is also quite a send-off for Playhouse chief Ed Stern, who chose this revival to close his 20-year Playhouse run. There are explosions of light, smoke, sound, even grand illusions and a little voodoo.

There's an insane (in a good way) scenic master stroke that suggests space aliens are involved. Zowie. (Then again, this may be *de rigueur* at rock concerts.) **I'm applauding 'til my hands burn the work of the entire design team, starting with sound designer David B. Smith and lighting designer Thomas Hase.**

But let's start at the beginning of Keith Glover's blues-rich, 20th century folk tale of the Dupree family and a life-on-the-line battle for charmed guitars, set in rural Alabama in 1966, first produced at Playhouse almost 15 years ago.

David Gallo's dazzling set design starts with the original and grows it. Under a wide arc of concert lighting and a series of hanging panels painted with a lightning storm in a blazing sunset, the playing area is on a low circular platform. Overhead is an enormous inverted pyramid.

At the center of the platform is a spiral, reminiscent of the start of the Yellow Brick Road, but this road is polished wood and flows up into a ramp reminiscent of a guitar stock. The ramp also flows around and along the front of the stage.

In a prologue, a "trickster" – no longer human, not quite immortal – who goes by the name of Thunder (David St. Louis) loses a guitar 'cutting' contest to the late Jaguar Dupree. Flash forward (10? 15? 20 years?): Jaguar's widow (Terry Burrell) is keeping company with his twin brother Dregster (Trent Armand Kendall).

The entire cast shines under Glover's direction. They throw themselves into the over-the-top spirit of the story and know how to deliver these songs – and the moves. Choreographer Ken Roberson makes it all look natural and as smooth as can be.

Jaguar's twin children are now adults, and each owns one of the magic guitars. Glory (Jennie Harney) has lost her sight and lives at home where she is lost in depression and slumps around in a chenille robe. Jaguar, Jr. (Timothy Ware), whose taste in suits leans toward cheesy Vegas lounge, comes home to announce that he has lost his magic guitar to a mysterious man. Paul Tazewell's costumes are few but eye-popping.

Enter Thunder, also quite the fashion plate, who wants the other guitar. If he doesn't get it, he doesn't turn back into a human, he turns to stone.

When "Thunder" had its original run at Playhouse, it was like a little engine that could, beguiling and filled with invention, promise and songs that demanded hand-clamping, foot-stomping, shouts and whistles.

Fast forward to April 2012. New theater technologies create a jaw-dropping production that's not too big for the music or performers, but weighs too much for Glover's middling script, with its over-long first act heavy on explanation and domestic dealings.

No matter how engagingly seasoned with Deep South ethos the language is, Glover's first act is gravity-bound and not a good fit with the big theatrics which surround it. Happily, the dialogue is pretty much pushed aside for the second act (with the exception of an over-long drunk scene) for a series of terrific songs about love, self-awareness, loss, more love and moving on.

The first act? All is forgiven.

"Thunder Knocking on the Door," through May 20, Playhouse in the Park Marx Theatre, Eden Park. Tickets \$35-\$71, subject to change. (Check local discount web sites for deals.) 513-421-3888 and www.cincyplay.com.