

Majestic Theater, West Springfield, MA

**Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story** by Alan Janes. Directed by Danny Eaton.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

*“Oh, Boy!”*

Real life stories are compelling. Buddy Holly’s phenomenal success in the world of Rock music came in the late 1950s. His early death at age 22 was a tragedy that included the deaths of two other major figures in pop music, The Big Bopper and Richie Valens (who was only 17). This musical on stage in West Springfield, Massachusetts gives us the hit songs Holly created, gives us a look at his life and choices, gives us back the man for just a little while, well, for three hours. It’s a long show that never feels long. And that is due to the fine talent on stage at the Majestic Theater.



Dan Whelton (of Manchester, CT, with glasses) is pictured at front as musician Buddy Holly, backed by (from left) Josh Karam (of Suffield, CT), Jacob Nichols (of East Longmeadow), Doug Wallace (of Springfield) who portray his band The Crickets; Photo: Kait Rankins

This same show opened the theater 25 years ago and it was so popular that the company has now revived it seven times. Each new production has offered the featured roles to new players. This year’s Buddy Holly, Dan Whelton, appeared in the previous production in the role of Tommy Allsop, the fourth member of The Crickets, Holly’s back-up band. Like the rest of the

company the four actors who play the band, play instruments and act and can sing. One woman, Chelsie Nectow, acts, plays piano and celeste and saxophone. It's a remarkable collection of professionals.



Steve Henderson (of Westfield), Dan Whelton;  
Photo: Kait Rankins

Whelton makes the visual work and he may also make the vocals fit the picture, but at the performance I saw the sound balance was not really appropriate: the band drowned their Buddy Holly out and not more than a word or two in any song could be clearly heard. It was a shame because the actor was working the visuals so well and if his vocal interpretation was even close he would have been perfection. I just don't know.

The company players all did very good jobs. Joshua Aaron Mason as a record producer who became Holly's manager was excellent; Greg Mitchell Alexander as Denzel Jefferson was terrific; Shannon Lamb as Marlena Madison was comically

spectacular. Brad Shepard as the Surf Ballroom MC did a good job, even making jokes about the dead microphone which might not have been jokes in the script. Who knows? Natasha Ellis, Shannon Lamb, Chelsie Nectow and Tina Sparkle were the best girl group, The Snowbirds. Sparkle also shone in her moments as Holly's wife, Maria Elena Santiago. Calem Koval was a brilliant Ritchie Valens and Shaun O'Keefe's Big Bopper was great.

Director Danny Eaton kept the show alive and very motivated from start to finish. He maneuvered his large cast of twenty-three players almost constantly on the move. He managed to keep our focus, even when the script called for audience participation in at least two major sequences, The Apollo Theatre in Harlem and the Surf Ballroom in Montana. He was beautifully aided by whoever assisted with the choreography (Eaton himself perhaps). It all



Tina Sparkle (of Enfield, CT), Dan Whelton;  
Photo:Kait Rankins

worked beautifully and kept the show honest and real.

Costume Designer Dawn McKay drew the contemporary images perfectly. Scenic Designer Josiah Durham often surprised with period touches. Daniel D. Rist designed the lighting for the show with an eye toward the period (1956 - 1959) that gave the show its reality.



Rock pioneers (from left) The Big Bopper (Shaun O’Keefe of Enfield, CT), Buddy Holly (Dan Whelton of Manchester, CT) and Ritchie Valens (Caleb Koval of Amherst);.

Photo: Kait Rankins\

And of course the songs, from “That’ll Be the Day” to “Mailman, Bring Me No More Blues,” to “Maybe Baby” and the two “Peggy Sue” songs and of course, “Oh, Boy!”; they rock through your brain and your body. Even “La Bamba” and “Chantilly Lace” take their important places in the picture. This musical storybook is a songbook of memories. It makes for a fine experience even if it isn’t sound-perfect. It’s so worthwhile.

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**Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story** runs through May 28 at West Springfield’s Majestic Theater at 131 Elm Street, West Springfield, MA. Call (413) 747-7797 for tickets.