

Berkshire Theatre Group, Pittsfield, MA

Million Dollar Quartet, book by Colin Escott and Floyd Mutrux, original concept and direction by Floyd Mutrux, inspired by Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins.

Direction and Choreography by Greg Santos; Musical Direction by Colin Summers.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“You load sixteen tons, what do you get?”

On a cold night, December 4, 1956 at Sun Records in Memphis, Tennessee three major stars of the music business, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley met together at the studio that started their careers. They were joined by Jerry Lee Lewis who hadn't started his meteoric career yet, a woman Elvis brought with him and a few staff musicians. Sam Philips, who was Sun Records, who discovered all four of these music business figures, presided over an impromptu jam session, recorded it all and named the evening ‘the million dollar quartet.’ This play, on stage at The Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, is the second presentation of this work by the Berkshire Theatre Group and it is a rip-roaring, toe-tapping show that gets to the guts of those of us who grew up with their music, to the hearts of a younger generation of music



Zach Cossman, Billy Rude, Colin Summers, Emma Wilcox, Alessandro Gian Viviano, Kroy Presley, Bill Scott Sheets; Photo: Emma K. Rothenberg-Ware.

and theater fans, to the minds of music fans of all generations. Especially when it is this well presented.

It is a heavy show about Sam Philips and his need to make decisions that concern the future of Sun Records and all that he has built, following his convictions about the future of American popular music. The story of the play belongs to his character just as the music the others make belongs to him as well. He has fostered their careers, bringing them up from nothing to national renown and international stardom. Now, at the end of 1956 he stands to lose what he has created, what he has loved, molded, produced and protected. This show is a family story, an intimate look at the relationships of father and sons. It is a moving experience.

It also has twenty-two songs ranging in style from the gospel “Peace in the Valley” to the rock standard “See You Later Alligator” to the romantic ballad “Memories are Made of This,” to the raucous and rambunctious “Great Balls of Fire.” It is a wide-ranging hit parade from the years when I was growing up. Imagine that!

The cast is, basically, wonderful. Billy Rude is an extraordinary Jerry Lee Lewis, overwhelmingly agile at the piano and on the dance floor. Colin Summers, also the music director for the show, is a terrific Carl Perkins, moody and compliant and abrasive when necessary. Bill Scott Sheets is a remarkable Johnny Cash, seemingly downloading the star from somewhere close by. Alessandro Gian Viviano is a great singer and a handsome man, but he doesn’t quite conjure Elvis vocally or physically. His lower body movements don’t



Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins; Photo: Sam Philips



Billy Rude as *Jerry Lee Lewis*, Colin Summers as *Carl Perkins*, Alessandro Gian Viviano as *Elvis Presley*; Bill Scott Sheets as *Johnny Cash*; Photo: Emma K. Rothenberg-Ware

bring Elvis to the stage.

What does bring all four men to life are the costumes. Each star’s styles have been replicated by costume designer Arthur Oliver who also dresses Dyanne, Elvis’ girlfriend, in wonderful gowns that identify the period of the play and define her character as well.

What also works well are band members Kroy Presley as Perkins’ brother Jay who plays the bass fiddle and Trey Snyder who plays drummer Fluke. They are both terrific. That goes for Emma Wilcox

also who sings two wonderful numbers with class.

The same must be said for Zach Cossman who plays Sam Philips. He exhibits all the passions that Philips must have experienced with his three established stars and the patience he had to have had for the young, exuberant Jerry Lee Lewis. His is the principal “acting” role in this play and his need and his anguish are heart-chilling. As good as the other men are in their roles, roles we can identify with knowing who they were, Cossman brings Philips out of the shadows and into the light of harsh reality.

The perfect sets have been designed by Baron E. Pugh to the point of bare reality. Jose Santiago’s lighting design is more often than not subtle and ideal. Nathan Leigh’s sound design was sometimes sloppy, sometime excellent. Running the show will fix that, I’m sure. Greg Santos, the director and choreographer has constructed a grand show that always feels genuine, always exactly right in the relationships among these people. His dance movements are simple and also seem to be just what they should be when they occur.

All in all, this a fine show, very worth seeing and enjoying, either for the first time if you are young or for the time you recall and wish you’d witnessed first-hand. These “work-for-everyone” experiences don’t come along often enough, so you should make it a goal to get to The Colonial and experience it for yourself.

+ 06/29/2023 +

Million Dollar Quartet plays at The Colonial, 111 South Street, Pittsfield, MA through July 16. For information and tickets go go www.BerkshireTheatreGroup.org or call 413-997-4444.