

theRep, Albany, NY

*Million Dollar Quartet Christmas*, Book by Colin Escott

Directed by James Barry. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

*“Boogie Woogie Santa Claus”*

Colin Escott has reimagined his hit show “Million Dollar Quartet” as a Christmas reunion at Sun Records in Memphis, Tennessee for three established recording stars, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley along with up-and-coming Jerry Lee Lewis. His holiday version removes the dramatic elements of Sam Phillips story and replaces it with intense ego-matching and a whole lot of Christmas songs and the end-result is pure fun. No drama. Nothing to emotionally move an audience except to their feet applauding. The current production at theRep in Albany, New York does just that. They do it with a very special cast.



Taylor Aronson, Matt Cusack, Billy Rude, Luke Monday. Jeremy Sevelovitz;

Photo: Doug Liebig

Director James Barry has given the show a naturalness that leaves an observer wondering if the show has been directed at all. Everything seems real; every movement seems motivated by what preceded it; the people are people, not actors, not caricatures, not portrayals. They just are and we are the proverbial flies on the wall. Barry has brought everyone into the present day, just as if they’d been filmed on that December night in 1956 when Elvis came home for a visit with a girl who would soon disappear from his life forever. It is pure brilliance and the dancing created by choreographer Freddy Ramirez does the same thing. Every dancing moment feels like dancing and not like choreography. These two men have created a picture-perfect presentation that gives this show life, real life.



Matt Cusack; Photo: Doug Liebig

Matt Cusack is a fine version of pre-June Carter Johnny Cash. He is charismatically handsome and offers the sombre tones of Cash as a performer and a person. When he speaks about his time in Europe as a soldier, or about his children and his wife, he is as moving a human being as he is when he sings in that characteristically deep voice that threatens to shake pictures off the walls. Cusack is wonderful.

Jeremy Sevelovitz bring Carl Perkins to life with a simplicity that feels just like the man always did in his recordings. He is a big man, simple in appearance and in attitude; unable to forget his big hit song, “Blue Suede Shoes,” stolen by Elvis. Sevelovitz hold the compassion card in this show and without begging for sympathy, he gets it in every scene and song. Just like Perkins. Again, this is a portrait forged in steel and poured generously onto the stage.

Elvis Presley and his girlfriend Dyanne hold center stage through much of the show. She is the only woman on the scene and she uses a flirtatious nature to hold the attention of all these dynamic male personalities. She is played at theRep by Taylor Aronson in a bouncy blonde wig and a dress that swirls in that 1950s manner that made stockings a thing of joy if the seams were straight (and hers definitely were). She sings, she flirts, she dances, she flirts, she plays instruments, she flirts. She unseats Jerry Lee Lewis and sits him back down again without disturbing his self-centered self. Aronson is devastatingly lovely to look at and seemingly delightful to hold. At least Presley seems to think so. When they dance together they are sexually one. He is played to perfection by Luke Monday. Well-dressed and Hollywood coiffured, Monday is grand Elvis, singing like him, moving like him, romantic in the way we read about him. Monday is the best Elvis I’ve ever seen in the two versions of this musical memory voyage.

Accompanying the “quartet” are two fine musicians, Jason Cohen as Brother Jay on bass and Ian Kerr-Mace as W.S. “Fluke” Holland on drums. Individually they are glorious, together they are perfection. Kerr-Mace opens the second act with a drum solo that would make any drummer envious. They are highly believable as Sun Records house musicians, a duo that gave Presley his sound and Cash his musical identity. But wait. . .there is one more actor to mention, one who has graced the region earlier this year in the same role, only different.

Billy Rude (who won the “Berkie”



Luke Monday, Taylor Aronson; Background: Ian Kerr-Mace, Jason Cohen; Photo: Doug Liebig

for his earlier Portrayal) *is* Jerry Lee Lewis. He just simply is the music man of the 1950s. In this edition of the show his ego is overblown and truly matches his pianistic stylings. In the original show his ego and his eagerness had a certain charm. In this version he is more obnoxious than he is charming or disarming. Rude manages to make this work to the character's advantage, however and even his "super-ego" is acceptable because the actor is so incredibly talented. He gives us a Lewis that must be closer to the original than the author intended. How he manages to play the piano the way he does without permanently injuring himself is little short of a miracle. Even if none of the others managed honest interpretations of their characters (which they all do), his alone would be worth the price of admission.



Billy Rude, Taylor Aronson, Rob Morrison, Ian Kerr-Mace, Jason Cohen, Luke Monday, Jeremy Sevelovitz, Matt Cusack; Photo: Doug Liebig

Rob Morrison's role as Sun Records owner/producer Sam Phillips has been reduced to a series of walk-ons which is unfortunate for in the original show the focus is always on Phillips who is threatened with so much loss that it almost kills him. Here he is little more than a telephone answerer and though Morrison does a good job with the role, he really has little to do.

The production is beautiful with excellent costumes by Howard Tsvi Kaplan, a stunning set designed by Christopher Rhoton and fun lighting designed by Jeff Adelberg. The sound design work by Jeffrey Salerno was uneven and sometimes made things difficult to hear. This is the fourth production of "M.D.Q." I've seen (first time in this edition) and I always enjoy it, but this time the cast is perfect and that gets it a high recommendation from me. As a holiday treat go see it in Albany. Go see it!

+ 12/07/2023 +

**Million Dollar Quartet Christmas** plays at theRep (Capital Repertory Theatre), 251 N. Pearl Street, Albany, NY through December 24. For information and tickets go to [Proctors.org](http://Proctors.org) or [Capitalrep.org](http://Capitalrep.org) or call 518-346-6204.