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Theater Review: This Buddy's for you



The songs of Buddy Holly are so timeless, creative and fun that you can hear them again and again.

Much the same can be said of "Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story," through June 17, Bucks County Playhouse, New Hope, and June 28 (previews start June 24) through July 9, Perelman Theater, Kimmel Center, Philadelphia.

"Buddy" is more than a jukebox musical. The show, with its storyline beginning in Lubbock Texas, in January 1956, has heart, more than a modicum of dialogue, and, of course, one of the seminal tragedies in popular music history: the deaths of Holly, Ritchie Valens and The Big Bopper in a Feb. 3, 1959, chartered plane crash after a concert in Clear Lake, Iowa, that inspired Don McLean to write the song, "The Day the Music Died."

"Buddy," with book by Alan James, has more than 20 of Holly's greatest hits, including "Everyday," "It's So Easy," "Maybe Baby," "Not Fade Away," "Peggy Sue," "That'll Be the Day," "True Love Ways" and "Words of Love." If you remember when Holly's hits were on the charts, or if you enjoy 1950s rock 'n' roll, this "Buddy"s for you.

The original production opened in London's West End, where it ran for more than 10 years, and premiered on Broadway in 1990.

Nearly the entire cast from the 2016 "Buddy" run at Bucks County Playhouse is back for the 2017 production.

When he died, Holly was 22. Who knows how much more he could have accomplished? His music, and even the name of his group, the Crickets, inspired countless rock 'n' rollers, including the Beatles, who were named in homage to Holly and his band. Many other pop-rock performers have charted hits with Holly songs.

The exuberant, infectious, toe-tapping musical renders some 10 of Holly's songs in the first act and some 11 of Holly's songs in the second act by a tight-knit outfit that will have you doing double-takes, especially for Buddy Holly, played with beaming authenticity by John Dewey, reprising his Bucks' role. Dewey not only has the Holly "hiccup" singing down, he has the stance, and he wears the thick black-frame glasses well.

Also back are: Zach Cossman (Jerry Allison, drums, and an amazing drummer he is), Andrew Frace (Joe B. Mauldin, bass, who is a cut-up, standing, laying down and hopping on the instrument without missing a beat), and Max Sangerman (Tommy Allsup, guitar).

Also returning: Kent M. Lewis (Norman Petty, producer, in whose studio Holly and the Crickets recorded), Elizabeth Nestlerode (Vi Petty, Norman's wife), Karack Osborn (The Big Bopper, and a hoot singing the Bopper's hit, "Chantilly Lace"), and Gilbert Sanchez (Ritchie Valens, doing a great "La Bamba," Valens' hit).

Brandi Massey (as the Apollo Performer is a show-stopper with her rendition of the Isley Brothers' hit, "Shout").

A newcomer to the Bucks' "Buddy" production is Natalie Ortega (as Buddy's wife, Maria Elena, and she is excellent).

Director Hunter Foster keeps the musical moving at a brisk pace.

Music director is Paul Masse. Sound designer is Matthew Given. Choreographer is Lorin Latarro. Costume designer Nicole V. Moody gets the threads right.

The scenic design by Adam Koch effectively utilizes the Bucks' stage restored turntable to move between a radio station, recording studio, concert stage and other interior locations. Lighting designer is Gina Scheer.

The finale celebrates Buddy Holly's music with a rendition of "Rave On" that indeed, does. This production of "Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story" is better than ever.

Tickets: Bucks County Playhouse box office, 70 S. Main St., New Hope; bcptheater.org; 215-862-2121