



August 15, 2018

Theater: 'Million Dollar Quartet' at the Bucks County Playhouse



1 L-R: Brandyn Day as Jerry Lee Lewis, John Michael Presney as Carl Perkins, Ari McKay Wilford as Elvis Presley, and Sky Seals as Johnny Cash in "Million Dollar Quartet" appearing at the Bucks County Playhouse. (Joan Marcus)

By Ted Otten -For The Times of Trenton

Is it some kind of pop music fantasy, or could it be true that four music superstars are in the same place at the same magic moment for an unforgettable panorama of musical creation? Those questions are answered in "Million Dollar Quartet," a musical onstage through September 15 at New Hope's Bucks County Playhouse where a recording session at Sun Records in Memphis which took place on December 4, 1956 starring Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins AND Jerry Lee Lewis is re-enacted.

The show, according to its performers at BCP, is more than just a juke-box musical, the kind of show which merely strings together songs associated with a particular performer or performance style. It was created by Floyd Mutrux and Colin Escott in 2006, and it had several productions, like a Chicago run of

2500 performances, before it opened on Broadway in 2010, and an original cast CD was issued that year. Its Broadway run of 489 performances earned three Tony Award nominations, and Levi Kreis, who played Jerry Lee Lewis, won the Tony for best featured actor in a musical. In 2011, the show moved from the Nederlander Theatre to its new off-Broadway home at New World Stages, and a popular production opened in London's West End as well.

The cast includes the four singers, Elvis Presley's girlfriend, fictionalized here and renamed Dyanne, and Sam Phillips, founder and recording supervisor of Sun Records which he founded in 1950. Phillips is there to record one of his established stars, Carl Perkins (played by John Michael Presney) and to pair him with newcomer Jerry Lee Lewis (Brandyn Day). Johnny Cash (Sky Seals) stops by as does another of Phillips' recent discoveries, Elvis Presley (Ari McKay Wilford), fresh from making "Love Me Tender," his first Hollywood film, accompanied by his current girlfriend.

At BCP, James Ludwig plays Phillips, the role played on Broadway by Hunter Foster who's directing the BCP production, and Ryah Dixon plays Dyanne. Ludwig is a BCP veteran, but the others are new to New Hope.

Elvis, who became one of the 20th century's superstars and is probably counted as Phillips' major musical discovery, is played by Ari McKay Wilford who did quite a bit of research into Presley's early career.

"I've been in eight other productions of this show, all directed by Hunter Foster, and each production is different because of the different chemistry among performers, a different balance and energy," said Wilford.

"I actually didn't know much about him before I started playing him," said Wilford, "but remember that I'm playing him at a young age, and he's not into the glitzy things he wore in Vegas later. He had just finished his first film that hadn't been released yet and was home for a visit. I watched 'Love Me Tender' and also 'Jailhouse Rock,' the film that came after and is, I think, much better. I watched him on talk shows and videos of him doing 'Hound Dog' which really helped me with my own version in this show. I watched documentaries and listened to interviews with people who knew him back then. He changed drastically from who he was in 1956 to who he was at the end of his life.

"There are lots of Elvis impersonators out there, but that's not what I strive to do. I try to bring the essence of young Elvis into my performance, and I like and enjoy doing all my songs. He was a keen observer of others and knew when something would work for him. The way he moved was specific to Elvis; his leg movements, for example, started out from his nervousness, I discovered, and when his audience responded to that, he kept it and exaggerated it. I think Elvis was a good guy who got lost along the way," said Wilford who cited his year and a half Broadway run in "Once" as his favorite role so far and said that creating any stage role would be memorable for him.

Sky Seals has been in ten previous productions of the show in the last two years as Johnny Cash but is also busy writing youth musicals with his own Wide-Eyed Productions, a New York based non-profit theatre collective.

"Cash had a resurgence in the nineties," said Seals, "and that movie about him, 'I Walk the Line' were just about all I knew about Cash before I played him, but I grew up with the Beatles," said Seals, "and he's not the man who ran into problems later in life. He has an air of quiet confidence and a kind of big

brother attitude towards the others, but Sam is their father figure. The image of a rock star hadn't yet been created in 1956, but this show's time period's time was at its very beginnings although we see it more in Elvis and Jerry. Cash, of course, was more in the Carl Perkins country style, and during the show, he has a secret which I don't want to give away.

"I like the ensemble piece that we all do called 'Peace in the Valley' a quiet moment that's very rewarding and the kind of thing Johnny liked to do on his tours. That was a moment of spirituality for Johnny. In '56, he had already had hits like 'I Walk the Line,' and he was just beginning to live the life of a celebrity," said Seals who cited Berger in "Hair" as one of his most satisfying roles and stating that as his voice darkens, he's looking forward to some of the more dramatic singing stage roles.

Jerry Lee Lewis was the youngest of the quartet, and Brandyn Day, who's already played him in this show over 200 times, said, "I've pretty much got him in my body, and doing research about him never ends because he's the only one left alive today, and he's still performing.

"I like him as a person," said Day, "and he's got such an interesting life, and I do my best to honor his talent. He was the cockiest of the four and, I think, the latest bloomer. I think people know his big hit 'Great Balls of Fire' but for the rest of his accomplishments, people have no idea, and perhaps they'll learn something about him and about all these guys as people from this show.

"One of the comments people have often made to me is surprising," said Day, "because they say, 'You're not really playing, are you?' after they've just seen us all work really hard for the last two hours. How can they not appreciate all our efforts? Especially on those days when we do two shows, it's exhausting being this man!"

IF YOU GO

"Million Dollar Quartet"

Where: Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope, PA

When: through September 15, Tuesday & Thursday at 7:30, Friday & Saturday at 8 p.m.; matinees

Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday & Sunday at 2 p.m.

How much: Tickets are \$40 to \$80; group rates for 10 or more

Contact: (215) 862 - 2121 or at buckscountyplayhouse.org.