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The Buddy Holly Story

By Denny Dyroff

Charles Hardin Holley was a young man from Lubbock, Texas who passed away in 1959 at the age of 22.

Holley's death made headlines around the world.

Better known by his stage name Buddy Holly, he was one of the most popular musicians of the day. Holley died in a tragic plane accident that also took the lives of fellow musicians Richie Valens and The Big Bopper.

Holley, who had massive hits with songs such as "Peggy Sue," "Not Fade Away," "Oh Boy," "That'll Be The Day" "Rave On" and "Maybe Baby," may have died more than a half-century ago but his legend lives on.

His legend lives on mainly through his music but also through stage and screen.

Holley's life story inspired a Hollywood biographical film, "The Buddy Holly Story," which came out in 1978. Its lead actor Gary Busey received a nomination for the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of Holley.

Holley's life and career also was the inspiration for "Buddy – the Buddy Holly Story," which achieved success as a stage musical.

From June 28-July 9, the Kimmel Center is presenting "Buddy – the Buddy Holly Story" at its Perelman Theater.

"Buddy – the Buddy Holly Story" is a musical in two acts written by Alan Janes, that opened at London's Victoria Palace Theatre in October 1989.

Considered to be the first of the so-called "Jukebox Musicals," the show ran in London's West End for over 14 years, playing 5822 performances. Janes took over the producing of the show himself in 2004.

"Buddy – the Buddy Holly Story" has been on tour in the UK for 17 of the last 24 years, and has played Broadway, five U.S. National Tours, Canada, Sweden, South Africa, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Germany, Holland, Singapore, Finland, Austria, Denmark and countless other productions around the world.

This has resulted in the show being named as “The World’s Most Successful Rock ‘n’ Roll Musical.” Janes was nominated for an Olivier Award for Best Musical. Internationally, “Buddy – the Buddy Holly Story” has received 29 nominations and awards.

The show has had more than 50 productions around North America, including runs at the Grande Theatre in Ontario, Canada; the 5th Avenue Theatre in Seattle; the Laguna Playhouse in California and locally at the Walnut Street Theater in Philadelphia, the Fulton Theater in Lancaster, and the Buck County Playhouse in New Hope.

It first played the Bucks County Playhouse in June and July 2016 with John Dewey in the lead role. The production featuring Dewey as Holly returned to the theater in New Hope earlier this year and now is heading to the Kimmel Center.

“This production has just two stops but we also did the show last year in Bucks County,” said Dewey, during a phone interview last week from his temporary home in Philadelphia. “I auditioned a year-and-a-half ago and then did the lead role in the show last summer at the Bucks County Playhouse.

“Everyone from that cast is back for this year’s shows except the actress who played Maria Elena. Actually, the return of the show wasn’t planned after last year but it has worked out well.”

Directed by Tony Award nominee Hunter Foster with choreography by Lorin Latarro, “Buddy” ran at the Bucks County Playhouse in May and June prior to moving south to South Broad Street.

Also returning to the production are Zach Cossman as Jerry Allison; Andrew Frace as Hipockets Duncan; James David Larson as Joe B. Mauldin; Kent M. Lewis as Norman Petty; Brandi Massey as Apollo Performer; Elizabeth Nestlerode as Vi Petty; Karak Osborn as ‘The Big Bopper’; Gilbert Sanchez as Ritchie Valens; Max Sangerman as Tommy Allsupp.

They will be joined by Natalie Ortega, as the sole newcomer to the cast. She appears as Buddy’s wife, Maria Elena Holly.

Dewey, a Virginia native who graduated not long ago with a music theater degree from the Boston Conservatory, is obviously too young to have grown up with Holly’s music – but that has not been a drawback.

“I was kinda familiar with Buddy Holly before I got involved with this show,” said Dewey, who lives in New York. “Everybody has heard some of his music on the radio. “It wasn’t until I got the role that I really started digging into all his music.”

The musical’s action takes place in Lubbock, Texas; Clovis, New Mexico; New York City and Clear Lake, Iowa, between January 1956 and February 1959.

Starting out as a Country & Western singer in Lubbock, Holly teams with his two friends Joe B. Mauldin and Jerry Allison form The Crickets.

After an inauspicious start at Decca Records in Nashville, Holly and the Crickets sign a contract with up-and-coming innovative record producer, Norman Petty and make records for Brunswick Records.

Within hours of meeting they start to record Buddy's biggest hit "That'll Be The Day" which will rocket up the charts to number one in a matter of weeks. Buddy Holly & the Crickets suddenly become the hottest act in the country.

Throughout his brief but brilliant career, Holly recorded hits for three record labels – Decca, Brunswick and Coral.

"I didn't listen to a lot of the Decca stuff," said Dewey. "This show concentrates on what he wanted to do and where he ended up. Listening to the Decca tapes would have been me going in the wrong direction. Instead, we concentrate on the hits.

"The show picks up when Buddy Holly is 19 – right before he goes to Decca. It looks at how he went to Decca, was disappointed, got hooked up with people in Clovis and his rise to where he got to.

"The second act revolves around his time with Maria Elena and being in New York. It mainly focuses on Buddy and Maria Elena and their relationship – and with the rise to fame, the rock stardom and the collapse."

Video link for The Buddy Holly Story – https://youtu.be/PK_PTYws0Bc.

The show at the Kimmel Center's Perelman Theater will run from June 28 through July 9.