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CAPE COD TIMES

Entertainment & Life – July 11, 2018

Legends rock house in 'Million Dollar Quartet'



Appearing in "Million Dollar Quartet" are, from left, James Barry, as Carl Perkins; Sam Weber, as Jay Perkins; Sky Seals, as Johnny Cash; Brandyn Day, as Jerry Lee Lewis; and Ari McKay Wilford, as Elvis Presley. [Cape Playhouse]

By [Kathi Scrizzi Driscoll](#)

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DENNIS – Musical theater or classic-rock concert? “Million Dollar Quartet” succeeds at being both, and Cape Playhouse’s area premiere of this “What if?” show is a nostalgic, rollicking, foot-stomping combination of the two.

There aren’t a lot of theater shows that get patrons loudly echoing back a chorus to a favorite tune and dancing next to their seats, and even in the aisles, by the finale.

Just knowing the cast of characters helps to explain why this one does. The show is set on one night – Dec. 4, 1956 – when Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis met at the Sun Records studio in Memphis, where they got their start (with pioneering rock ‘n’ roll producer Sam Phillips) and then all jammed together. It really happened.

Cue a score that includes the big opener of “Blue Suede Shoes,” plus “Folsom Prison Blues,” “Hound Dog,” “Great Balls of Fire,” “I Walk the Line,” “See You Later Alligator” and 16 other hits.

Writers Floyd Mutrux and Colin Escott take that hard-to-believe brief crossing of talent and explore what might have happened that night as a way to also give a mini history lesson on how Sun Records shaped those icons’ careers – and all of rock ‘n’ roll. While interesting and informative, the plot here is about as thin as most jukebox musicals, largely providing a terrific excuse to revive the classic tunes.

You may be Googling historical details afterward, but you’ll likely leave the playhouse feeling like you’ve actually stepped inside a recording studio. Scenic designer Josh Smith’s beautifully done recreation is detailed down to the gold records on the wall and clocks set to different time zones. Doors lead to lobby and office areas that are only seen through windows but are just as realistic. Artistic director Michael Rader gave a deserved shout-out at Tuesday’s opening to the crew that pulled together such a complicated set in only a couple of days.

In that “studio,” the playhouse cast nearly flawlessly channels the legends of rock, rockabilly and country music – not so completely in looks but certainly in vocal and musical talent, as well as charisma. Not only do they have to act the storied (and out-sized, especially Brandyn Day’s take on Lewis) roles, but they’ve got the singing and instrument-playing chops to back that up.

On Stage

What: “Million Dollar Quartet”

Written by: Floyd Mutrux and Colin Escott

When: through July 21

Where: Cape Playhouse, 820 Route 6A, Dennis

Tickets: \$20-\$80

Reservations: capeplayhouse.com, 508-385-3911

Playhouse's leading lady

As of Saturday's closing performance of "Sylvia," Jen Cody became the actress who has performed in the most productions in the history of the 92-year-old Cape Playhouse in Dennis, according to the theater. She surpasses popular stars there who have included Gertrude Lawrence, Betsy Palmer and Tallulah Bankhead.

In other actress news, listen closely to the voice of God in the theater's next show, "Altar Boyz," playing July 24-Aug. 4. That will be a pre-recording by Jane Krakowski (TV's "30 Rock" and "Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt"; Broadway's "She Loves Me" and "Nine").

Most have had plenty of practice – on their own and together – before getting to Dennis, and it certainly shows. James Barry, who does impressive double duty as the show's musical director, wears his volatile Perkins persona like a comfortable jacket after playing/singing the role for two years on national tour and doing one or both jobs in numerous regional productions since. That includes last summer on Long Island, performing there alongside some of his castmates now in Dennis. Among them: Jason Loughlin, who grounds the show and is the affable host as conflicted producer Phillips, groomer of these huge talents and so many others; Ari McKay Wilford as a charmingly unsure Elvis, who lights up in front of a microphone; and Bligh Voth playing Elvis' then-girlfriend, who performs a sizzling "Fever" and provides strong vocal back-up (especially on the powerhouse Act 1 ender "Rockin' Robin"/"I Shall Not Be Moved") and a sympathetic ear as the musicians ponder their futures.

Several of the Playhouse actors also appeared together in Cincinnati earlier this year, including Sky Seals, portraying Cash as a tough, religious gentleman with a pure, deep voice and top guitar skills, and back-up musicians Zach Cossman as ace drummer Fluke, and Sam Weber as Jake Perkins, who wows by playing his bass from numerous positions, including laying down on the floor, sitting and standing on the instrument, and wielding it like a guitar.

Day seems newest to his impudent, irreverent role of Lewis, but has no trouble keeping up. His frenzied piano-playing and wild-child attitude are enhanced by antics of playing the keys from all kinds of positions – including standing, around legs propped on the piano top and backwards. Day's "Whole Lotta Shakin'" finale brings down the house.

The electric coming together of this group is led by director Hunter Foster, a Playhouse veteran who has helmed "Million Dollar Quartet" at several other theaters from a place of expertise: He played Phillips when the show debuted on Broadway in 2010.

He and his cast will bring this same show to the Bucks County Playhouse in Pennsylvania later this summer as part of an unusual shared production for the Dennis theater. The choice to keep this

group together is a brilliant one: "Million Dollar Quartet" is a rousing good time as a night at the theater or a mega-concert of fans' dreams.