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[Lew J Whittington, Contributor. arts journalist](#)

“Buddy” more than a jukebox musical

07/04/2017 06:08 pm ET



COURTESY OF KIMMEL CENTER

John Dewey as Buddy, with (l-r) Zach Cossman, Maximilian Sangerman & Anrew Frace

It was an inestimable loss to the American music when Buddy Holly, Richie Valens and J.P. Richardson (aka the Big Bopper) were killed in a plane crash in 1959. But despite the rumor, their music did not die and is vividly revived in the hi-octane Bucks County Playhouse production of “Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story.”

The show has traveled from BCP to the Kimmel Center’s Perelman Theater (a perfect venue for it) with the sensational original cast led by the incredible John Dewey as Buddy. This may look like a standard jukebox musical to package all of Holly’s hits, but it is also a thrilling evening of theater and music, with a well crafted book by Alan Jones and directed by Hunter Foster.

Jones has condensed Holly’s fast rise to stardom, with some fictional plot devices, but this show delves deep into the music and the man, with a sensational ensemble of strong actors, singers, movers who also happen to be the great musicians who play the music all through the show in both studio and concert settings.

Holly was just 18 when he achieved local fame in Lubbock, Texas, but deejay Hipockets Duncan helped Holly and his band the Crickets, bass player Joe B. Mauldin and drummer Jerry Allison get on the local country music circuit. Hipockets fires them because they play rock & roll, instead of country, but he then arranges for them to record country at Decca records, but that also bombed for them. But Duncan then gets them to record with Norman Petty in his studio, who leaves them record what they want and in a year and a half Buddy Holly and the Crickets turn out 15 hits.



The show’s scenes in the recording studio and of concerts have wonderful era authenticity and great energy. And these actors deliver as musician. As Buddy Holly, John Dewey inhabits the role. He can bring all of Holly’s signature sounds of “Maybe Baby”, “Words of Love” “Peggy Sue” “It’s So Easy” “Not Fade Away” “Oh Boy,” as well as a playlist of less familiar Holly tunes.

Period detail of the recording and radio studios and various performance venues are achieved with Adam Koch's turntable set designs. And even more impressive in the detailing is Matthew Given's sound design that borders on technically astounding. Sound adjustments of studio equipment of the period, radio transmissions, and specificity of the sound of the concert scenes that changes throughout the show is impeccable.

Wonderful ensemble performances all the way around with everyone but Dewey playing multiple roles. Andrew Frace is the classy and humorous dj Duncan and later a rockin' saxman. Kent M. Lewis as the smooth producer Petty and later a bluesy electric guitarist master in Holly's second band. Elizabeth Neslerode as Vi Petty reading to play one wicked rollin' piano who shows the Crickets a thing or two about stride. Zach Cossman and James David Larson have the look, and musical swagger of the Crickets Allison and Mauldin. Natalie Ortega is great in a very sketchily written part as Maria Elena Holly, who Buddy proposed to the day he met her (this actually happened) Maximilian Sangerman is the versatile guitar sideman and later one mean trumpeter in the finale. Brandi Chavonne Massey scorching rendition of 'Shout' blows the roof off and she is hilarious as the emcee at the famed Apollo Theater in Harlem.

Karack Osborn's is The Big Bopper knocks the house down with his rendition of "Chantilly Lace" and the first showstopper "Hello...Baby..." gyrating and lunging over the stage in a gold jacket with moves that out-Elvis- Elvis. That may have been the 11 o'clock number but then Gilbert D. Sanchez's rendition of La Bamba, not only vocally thrilling, but his mambo, salsa, cha-cha moves burning the floor. Throughout, John Dewey's tour de force performance as Buddy Holly is subtle, powerful and electrifying.

Hunter Foster, an artistic associate at Buck's County Playhouse, directs this fine ensemble with invention, style and wit. Nicole V. Moody's costume designs evoke so much about the era and the show couture keeps giving. Lorin Latarro's choreography is true to character especially in those smokin' musician moves as they blaze on their instruments, that make us want to bop till we drop.

Performances through July 9, 2017 at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, Broad & Spruce St. Philadelphia | www.kimmelcenter.org

