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Theater: 'Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story' at Bucks County Playhouse

BY [TED OTTEN](#)

For The Times of Trenton

"The things we did last summer," wrote lyricist Sammy Cahn, "we'll remember all winter long," and if you were among the thousands of audience members last summer who stomped their feet and cheered the Bucks County Playhouse's staging of "Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story" directed by Hunter Foster, you'll have the chance to see it again. If you missed it, you can find out what all the fuss was about because the production is back in New Hope for another run through June 17.

"Buddy" originated in London in 1989 and played in various theatres there for the next 14 years. Its Broadway run, beginning in 1990, was a mere 225 performances, but the show has been produced in 17 countries where it has played to over 25 million people. It is often cited as the first of the "pop star biography musicals."

Each act includes an important concert in the shockingly short career of Charles Hardin Holley from Lubbock, Texas. The first includes hits like the chart-topping "That'll Be the Day" and "Peggy Sue" with his backup group called the Crickets, and, in the second, Buddy sings on a Midwestern bus tour with the Big Bopper (J. P. Richardson) and Richie Valens who later die with him in a plane crash in Iowa, a tragic event immortalized by Don McLean in "American Pie" as "the day the music died."

Returning from last season are ten of the show's eleven original cast members including John Dewey in the title role. The only newcomer is Natalie Ortega who plays Maria Elena, Buddy's pregnant wife whom Holly had promised that he would never fly.

Ortega is a local girl who grew up in central New Jersey. Her school days included summers at Tomato Patch Workshop, an annual stage program at the West Windsor campus of Mercer County Community College which gave Ortega a taste of show business that helped her decide on her career.

"Maria Elena isn't onstage much, but I think she's important because, through her, we get to see Buddy as a tender, gentle person, not just an on-stage dynamo and driven composer. My favorite moment in the show is when Buddy sings her a song he wrote just for her, 'True Love Ways.' Scenes like that give the show a sense of humanity in addition to all those terrific songs.

"This isn't just a re-enactment of an important concert in each act. That's there, of course, the Apollo concert in Act One and the Clear Lake concert in Act II, but this is also a story about real people, people working and struggling to achieve something they believe in and isn't just their music although that's certainly there in abundance. I'm just sorry I don't get to sing more of it myself," said Ortega who cited playing Nina in "In the Heights," the Tony Award winning show Lin-Manuel Miranda wrote before that current blockbuster "Hamilton," as her favorite stage performance so far.

Both James David Larson who plays Joe B. Mauldin and Gilbert D. Sanchez who plays Richie Valens are happy to be returning to New Hope and to "Buddy." Sanchez remarked, "Last year, when everyone was on stage for the finale, it was thrilling. This year, it's not only exciting, but I'm doing this exciting thing with friends. We can look each other in the eye and have trust in each other. That's one of the great things this music can do: bring people together.

"I'm envious of my fellow cast members. I don't play any instrument, and they are all do and are so versatile. I guess my hips are my instrument. I didn't know all of Buddy Holly's music, but it's so easy to get into. I think his 'Every Day' is such a beautiful and romantic song. But I did know about Richie Valens, who was only 17 when he died, and I knew his music. He was one of my idols, and I read a biography of him and grew up with that film about him called 'La Bamba.'

"Last year, I was delighted by what people had to say afterwards. So many of the older people said that we had taken them back to a time in their lives when things seemed easier and music seemed better. We also had younger people who were impressed with the music and went with it. I guess that shows that so much of this music can transcend time," said Sanchez who cites Dr. Frank N. Furter in "The Rocky Horror Show" as his favorite role so far and Fabrizio in Adam Guettel's "The Light in the Piazza" as the role he'd most like to play.

James David Larson is a classically trained cellist who drew raves last year for the way he played bass. One critic described him as "hilariously athletic."

"Last year, the audiences were so great. We really got into it, and they went right along with us. There was a palpable energy in every audience that we could feel onstage. It was a blast," said Larson who enjoyed his time off stage looking at the plaques on the BCP walls listing the theater's past productions. He also enjoyed the small town atmosphere of New Hope and said, "I'm from a small town in Oregon, and getting away from the city into that atmosphere was a dream come true."

Larson grew up listening to the music of the Beatles but not Buddy Holly, but he was not surprised to hear that both John Lennon and Paul McCartney cited Holly's music as a major influence on their own music or that the name choice of the Beatles was because Holly's support group, when they saw him live at the London Palladium, was the Crickets.

If you miss this production in New Hope, you can catch its transfer to the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia where it will run from June 24 to July 9.

IF YOU GO

"Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story"

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

When: Through June 17; Tuesday through Thursday at 7:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. with matinees at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

How much: Tickets are \$40 to \$75; group rates for 10 or more.

Contact: 215-862-2121.