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Entertainment

'Buddy Holly' at Bucks County Playhouse: Delightful, persuasive bio-musical

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JOAN MARCUS

(Left to right:) Zach Cossman, Gilbert D. Sanchez, James David Larson, John Dewey, Maximilian Sangerman, and Karack Osborn in the Bucks County Playhouse production of "Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story."



by **John Timpane**, Staff Writer [@jtimpane](#) | jt@phillynews.com

Buddy Holly is with us for six weeks, and, judging from the [relaunch](#) of *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story* at [Bucks County Playhouse](#), it will be a rocking, dancing time.

The show plays there through June 17 then breaks down and [resumes at the Perelman Theater June 24 through July 9](#). It'll travel well: The stage set features a turntable, ideal for scene changes and narrative segues, and there's energy enough for three shows. *Buddy* was a box office success for Bucks County Playhouse last year, and, for its return, a new sound system showed off the music. (I wanted a shade more guitar, please.)

All rests on that music: Twenty-seven tunes, and the band is absolutely cracking. John Dewey is awkward, delightful, and driven as Buddy; Zach Cossman is tremendous as randy drummer Jerry Allison; and James David Larson is hilariously athletic as bassist Joe B. Mauldin. They make us believe we're hearing Buddy Holly and the Crickets – I'd be surprised if the Crickets ever sounded this good. Here is the Kimmel video of the New York rehearsals:

Each act builds to a turning point in Holly's sadly brief career: Act 1 ends with the storied Apollo Theater show, and Act 2 with the fatal last date, with Richie Valens and the Big Bopper at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa.

All 11 cast members sing and play like world-beaters. Karack Osborn nails it as the Big Bopper, and Gilbert D. Sanchez steals the show blind as Richie Valens. Natalie Ortega plays Maria Elena, Holly's bride. She sings only two or three lines near the end, but her voice is startling and divine. Elizabeth Nestlerode is an all-in great singer and rock pianist, smiling all the while. And Brandi Chavonne Massey is brassy and booming as a singer at the Apollo; her "Shout" about tears the roof off. Buddy looks out at an all-black audience, mumbles that he hopes his music "is enough" to bridge the gap, and Massey remarks, "Well, if it ain't, you dead."

The point of *Buddy* was and is to give you the sensation of being there; it was never to "get to know" Holly. There isn't time – as there wasn't in his life. He died in that plane crash at age 22, having enjoyed less than two years of world fame. So we don't get his inspiration (Elvis Presley, barely mentioned here, was involved), or the source of his resolution and drive. The one time we see a little more of him, he sits with Maria Elena and plays "True Love Ways," written for her. But even then, he's packed and ready to leave for that tragic last tour. Time presses.

What we get in *Buddy* are the songs, letting us ride that 1956-59 meteor streak. Leaving the show, we have sung and danced a lot, seen the tears in Dewey's eyes, and wondered much about this too-American story. It makes you feel good for future audiences from New Hope to Center City.

Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story. Through June 17 at the Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope. Tickets: \$40-\$75. Information: 215-862-2121, bcptheater.org