

Review: WE WILL ROCK YOU at The Barn: A Bohemian Rhapsody in Blue Suede Shoes

By: Paul Recupero

(Here's the bottom line, up front. WE WILL ROCK YOU, currently playing at The Barn Playhouse, is a terrific production of a flawed script/show. If you're a fan of Queen, you can stop reading now; go see and HEAR this 17-person cast perform like pros. They will indeed rock you. But if you want my take on the show itself, read on.)

A jukebox musical of a famous artist's songs takes one of three forms: (1) a retrospection of a the rise and struggles of the artist's career with clever use of the artist's songs to further that story (e.g., JERSEY BOYS, BEAUTIFUL); (2) a deluge of the artist's songs loosely connected by a thin plot unrelated to the artist (e.g., MAMMA MIA and most everything else); and (3) WE WILL ROCK YOU.

In all cases, the artist's songs are the hook, so if a production gets that wrong, there's no chance of success. In WE WILL ROCK YOU ("WWRV"), that artist is Queen, one of the most iconic and celebrated rock bands ever. Impressively, the Barn's WWRV, directed by Tom Lamphere, gets that part very right. The cast (under Laura Burhans' music direction) came out belting and harmonizing Queen's notoriously difficult hits one after another with flair. Emily Murphy as "Scaramouche" (yeah, we'll get to that) nearly had the audience on their feet with her pitch-perfect rendition of "Somebody to Love" that held nothing back. On vocals, this production is awesome.

Music aside, though, the show is a mixed bag. The plot is incomprehensible, but here's my best shot. In a totalitarian dystopia 300 years from now, Apple runs the world and classic rock like Queen is forbidden (or maybe it isn't, because the tyrants who banned it also sing it). Two of the downtrodden (Murphy and JJ Trainor) have heard the "call to adventure" (offstage perhaps?), which were Queen lyrics transmitted telepathically (or maybe read from "sacred texts"). So since these two heard (or read) the words "Scaramouche" and "Galileo Figaro," that's what they name themselves, because that's something people do. But they're on the run from autocrats who hate Queen (except when they love Queen), so they hide out in the "Heartbreak Hotel." They're taken in by a bunch of rock-and-roll-loving hippies (who can pronounce "Janis Joplin" but not "poster"), who also apparently received telepathic messages/read sacred texts because they've named themselves after "ancient" musical icons like Buddy Holly (Tony DeCarlo), Ozzy Osborne (Emily Beck), and Britney Spears (Vince Vuono). While there, they all praise Elvis as King and lament the premature loss of artists in the "27 Club" (although in this reality every musician they reference would have died centuries ago). And then...it gets confusing.

There's nothing wrong with wacky plots. Last season's THE EVIL DEAD (also directed by Lamphere and featuring many of the same actors) was delightfully bonkers. But where EVIL DEAD was centered in one location with hilarious segments calling back to the cult films and other movie tropes, WWRV's narrative is all over the place, like something theatre majors on magic mushrooms cooked up in a weekend but never workshopped (and never finished, as the show just "ends" when it runs out of songs). About half the lines are quotes of familiar song lyrics (not limited to Queen or even rock), which is funny until it isn't. Major props to Trainor who is saddled with most of the song-lyric dialogue and does his best. But what can anyone do with an earnest Shylock-esque monologue that goes something like: "I am the walrus. I am the dancing queen. Who let the dogs out? Who? Who?"

Notwithstanding the above, I had a great time at WWRV's opening night, laughed heartily at many moments, and was thoroughly engaged in the Barn's production. The musical theatre adage that if the performers are having fun, so will the audience certainly holds true here. Kudos to the Barn's stellar cast who commit to everything 100% and soar far above the show's innate shortcomings.

In addition to Murphy and Trainor, there are standout performances in the supporting roles. As the "villains," Michelle Kilmer and Justin Lamphere make a dynamic contrast: Kilmer as the clamorous "Killer Queen" (a half video game character or something), and Lamphere as her measured henchman "Khashoggi" (dressed as a mix of Neo from "The Matrix" and Rufus from "Bill & Ted"). His expressionless, straight-out line delivery is consistently funny. While I wasn't a fan of the overused song-lyric dialogue, when during the torture of the captured "Britney Spears" Lamphere tells his minion, in deadpan, to "hit him baby one more time," it was pretty great. Also laudable are the aforementioned DeCarlo, Beck, and Vuono as the lead Bohemian hippies, who bring a lot of laughs with their committed deliveries that lesser actors would not have been able to pluck from Ben Elton's subpar script.

The ensemble is strong too. The “Radio Gaga” numbers that open the acts sound great and are visually engaging, with blacklight, neon costumes, and fluid choreography (by Amanda Lamphere), despite my not understanding their purpose. Also on the visuals, the dual projections are used effectively. Sound, sometimes an issue at the Barn, is clear and well balanced. The production’s pacing is solid, aided by the multi-faceted set (designed by Rob Frankel) that easily detaches, swings around, and reattaches as something else many times.

If this review reads like it’s all over the place, then it’s a good match for the musical. WWRY’s narrative isn’t horrible, just horribly unfocused (at two hours and forty-five minutes, including an intermission and encores). Nevertheless, the strong direction, all-in performances, and superb vocals in the Barn’s production deliver something entertaining enough that at the end I was gleefully swaying my phone’s light with several other audience members during “We Are The Champions,” even though I had no idea what had been conquered.

If You Go...

WE WILL ROCK YOU

Music and Lyrics by Queen

Book by Ben Elton

Directed by Tom Lamphere

September 27–October 12, 2024

The Barn Playhouse

1700 Christopher Lane

Jeffersonville, PA 19403

(610) 539-BARN

www.barnplayhouse.org

