

## **Review: RIDE THE CYCLONE at the Barn: "I wish I were(n't) big."**

By: Paul Recupero

RIDE THE CYCLONE, a 2009 Canadian cult musical recently revived by TikTok-fueled popularity, opens the Barn Playhouse's new season with a premise that's equal parts cotton candy comedy and existential dread. The Barn delivers a visually striking and technically polished production, though the show itself has some structural cracks.

The premise starts straightforward enough. Six high school choir students were riding a carnival roller coaster when it catastrophically failed, à la *Final Destination 3*. Only here, they didn't escape death. Rather, their deaths were foretold by The Amazing Karnak (Kevin Arena), a talking, sentient Zoltar fortune teller machine. Now trapped in a limbo detached from space but not time, they have one hour to unanimously decide which one of them deserves to return to life.

The Barn's production, directed by Tom Lamphere, is among the most technically impressive I've seen at the community theatre level. Lamphere and his production team do a terrific job seamlessly mixing projections and video with an intricately detailed set (designed by Steve DiNenno) that appropriately resembles a dilapidated corpse of a long-abandoned carnival.

Lighting (designed by Emily Cross) is a sight to behold (lame pun intended). The Barn recently did a major overhaul to their lighting system, and all I can say is wow. The new lighting equipment includes full-coverage LEDs and a pair of smart lights that, for this production, are programmed as follow spots. Karnak is starkly lit in an eerie green haze. The musical numbers each have their own accent color that pops without being distracting.

Sound (designed by Lamphere) is also in top form. The dialogue and vocals are crisp and clear, which is aided by the cast's excellent diction, and rarely overpowered by the music. While I initially missed a live orchestra, for a bizarre and intimate show like this, I think the music tracks are more than serviceable. As the plot (at least initially) loosely follows a "game" framework, I appreciated the "Press Your Luck" and "The Price is Right" sound effects.

Moving on to the characters, in addition to the seven listed roles, Lamphere decided to cast "swing" actors with guaranteed performances. Aside from Karnak, every role is essentially double cast, an unusual choice for a small show with such a short run. This means the group of actors I saw on opening night will not be the same group that will be seen in any other performance.

But the opening night cast was great and latched on to the absurd humor. After the quick setup, the show follows in the form of a musical revue, with Karnak introducing each student to tell his or her story through song (of different musical varieties), and every actor/student nailed his or her solo. The other students provide backup with tight harmonies. Credit to music director Laura Burhans for the stellar vocals. Credit also to choreographer Amanda Lamphere for crafting interesting choreo that effectively captures each music genre and, together with Tom Lamphere's varied blocking, creates an energetic production that never drags. Although Karnak doesn't sing or move much (he's in his

machine for the entire show), Arena consistently delivers his lines with a grave, deadpan delivery that contrasts well with the extravagant students.

Before seeing *RIDE THE CYCLONE*, I did my homework and listened to the cast recording. I remember thinking “These songs are cool; I wonder how they work into the plot.” Well, now I've seen the show, and I'm still wondering. The initial setup—that each student must convince the others why they deserve to live—seems sidelined after the first solo. The solos that follow are well performed, but once Ricky (Matthew Hogeland) started singing a 90s-style R&B ballad about how he's a space hunk on a planet populated by cats, I asked myself “What's going on here?”

The layout of the show is where minds will disagree. This is a broad generalization, but the musical's quirky humor and bold, genre-hopping score seem tailor-made for a Gen Z audience. I wish I could enjoy it that way. But my crotchety self, as an old millennial/young Gen Xer (whatever being born in 1980 means), wanted the show to explore its bizarre premise. While the characters' solos provide some depth to the stereotypical archetypes we initially see, many don't meaningfully further the narrative. What happened to the students singing to convince the others of their worth? This frustrated me a bit, regardless of how well the songs are written and performed.

Late into this short (90 minute) production, the show takes a more serious and introspective turn, which includes a personal and profound monologue by Constance (a powerful EB Bradigan). As strong as such individual moments are, I really wanted more character interaction and conflict, the latter of which is limited to Constance's fracturing relationship with her egocentric overachiever friend Ocean (a peppy Jules Reanna).

My favorite role was “Jane Doe” (Laura Spohn): the choir girl who strangely no one, not even herself, remembers. I don't mind that we never got answers to that because Spohn's performance was so much fun to watch. Looking like she just walked in from *Silent Hill*, she moves like an uncanny robot doll and is so distinct from the others in her voice, physicality, and facial expression. Spohn also is a beautiful and impressive vocalist, at one point singing her haunting soprano ballad while being rotated upside down strapped to a giant carnival wheel.

My Gen Z versus the world generalization is very much tongue-in-cheek. I'm well aware that love for *RIDE THE CYCLONE* is not strictly limited to one generation. If you're a fan of this musical (of any age), I highly recommend the Barn's top-notch production. If you're unfamiliar with it, I still recommend it for those same reasons. Even if the ride doesn't fully hold together, it's one you're unlikely to forget.

#### **RIDE THE CYCLONE**

**Music, Lyrics & Book by Jacob Richmond and Brooke Maxwell**

**Directed by Tom Lamphere**

**April 23–May 3, 2026**

**The Barn Playhouse**

**1700 Christopher Lane**

**Jeffersonville, PA 19403**

**(610) 539-BARN**

[www.barnplayhouse.org](http://www.barnplayhouse.org)