

Posted on Sat, Nov. 05, 2005

THEATER

Buddy Holly's No. 1 show

By **ROBERT TRUSSELL**

The Kansas City Star

Rave on!

The American Heartland Theatre's reprise of "Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story" is an agreeable bit of light entertainment, thanks to some nice performances and a succession of vintage pop tunes performed live.

Chief among the production's virtues is an unaffected performance by John Mueller as the Texas songwriter who died at 22 after an 18-month whirlwind of No. 1 singles. Mueller played the role when the Heartland staged "Buddy" in 1996 and has impersonated Holly frequently, either in this show or in a touring re-creation of Holly's final concert with the Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens (all three died in a plane crash in 1959).

Mueller shows no signs of boredom. He inhabits the role with simple emotional choices that allow him a high degree of credibility as the small-town kid who shot across the pop-music world like a comet. He also happens to be an excellent guitarist and successfully re-creates Holly's high-pitched hiccupping vocal style.

The book by Alan Janes and Rob Bettinson is standard-issue bio-drama storytelling. See Buddy the rebel playing rock 'n' roll on a live country radio broadcast. See Buddy butt heads with a thick-headed record producer in Nashville. See Buddy churn out a string of hit singles with record producer Norman Petty. See Buddy fall in love. See Buddy get married. See Buddy charter a doomed airplane in Iowa.

Buddy Holly deserves his place of honor in American music, but the show's version of his musical influences is questionable. There are references to Holly's music having a "colored feel" and a central episode — as it was in the 1978 movie with Gary Busey — is the appearance of Holly and the Crickets at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem.

In both the film and this show the Apollo management is flabbergasted that Holly is white, but the band quickly wins over the audience with its brand of rock 'n' roll.

It might be interesting to travel back in time to see how the audience actually responded. Polite skepticism or even open hostility can easily be imagined. But let's get real, people. Could anyone have really listened to Holly's records and be confused about his color? He was part of that group of rockers (including Elvis, Roy Orbison and

Carl Perkins) who came to the music from a rural, white background. He sang just like what he was — a white kid from Texas.

The reliable James Wright does double duty as Norman Petty and, amusingly, as the Big Bopper. And Joel Kipper delivers an outstanding rendition of “La Bamba” as Ritchie Valens. Mandy Morris as Buddy’s wife, Maria Elena Santiago, is surprisingly poignant in a role written in broad strokes.

Other supporting performances are adequate, although Tim Scott injects an element of wacky humor as the MC in Clear Lake, Iowa. You have to wonder whether some of Scott’s riffing was made up on the spot. Whether it was or wasn’t, he was very funny.

The real reason to see this show, of course, is the music. It’s performed with integrity for the most part. But the production bears one of the hallmarks of many musicals at the Heartland. Apparently no actor was hired who couldn’t play an instrument — any instrument — and in some of the big numbers the arrangements get a little weird.

Michael Dragen makes contributions on the trumpet and trombone, but I ask you — when have you ever heard a trombone solo in “Johnny B. Goode”? Dragen is a talented musician, but this comes close to rock ’n’ roll blasphemy.