

“Every Brilliant Thing” may be the most singularly affecting play you will see this year, not only because of the message it contains, but in the way it is presented.

- Daniel Skora

Tickets available now through February 25th, 2018



## ‘Million Dollar Quartet’ is a million bucks at Encore Musical Theatre

R E V | February 04, 2018 | Jenn McKee

DEXTER, Mich.—After seeing the opening night performance of *Million Dollar Quartet* at Dexter’s Encore Musical Theatre, I’m thinking an equally apt name for the show would be “Nostalgia Dance Party.”

And I don’t say that dismissively. No one loves a good dance party more than I do, believe me. But there’s also no getting around the fact that the small bit of narrative that’s embedded among performances of monster hits like “Hound Dog” and “Great Balls of Fire” — Colin Escott and Floyd Mutrux wrote the show’s book — feels like a pale afterthought.

Inspired by a historic meeting-of-the-greats that happened on December 4, 1956, when “Blue Suede Shoes” scribe Carl Perkins (Alex Canty) was scheduled to have a recording session at Memphis-based Sun Studios — backed by up-and-coming piano madman Jerry Lee Lewis (Marek Sapieyevski) — *Million Dollar Quartet* invites you to imagine sitting in the recording studio that day, when not only Johnny Cash (Stephen Shore) stopped by, but also the future King himself, Elvis Presley (Josh White), with his then-girlfriend (Kaitlyn Weickel) in tow.

The show tweaks history in a few key ways: the girlfriend who accompanied Elvis to the studio was a dancer, but in *Quartet*, she’s portrayed as a singer, so that she can be integrated into a few musical numbers; Cash actually stayed with Sun for another year, but in *Quartet*, his contract is up, and while he’s secretly already signed with Columbia, in hopes of finally recording the gospel album he’s long wanted to, Sun’s Sam Phillips (Jim Walke) is angling to get him to re-sign, and thus secure the label’s short-term future. And while *Quartet* is packed with these four music giants’ biggest hits, the real recording session largely featured numerous spirituals, which was the musical point of origin for all four of these Southern boys from poor families.

But *Quartet* isn’t really about re-creating the session as it happened; it’s about celebrating the music these four men created — inspired by black rhythm and blues musicians (as briefly acknowledged by Phillips in the show) — thus changing the course of American popular music forever.

The recording session occurred early in these artists’ careers — Elvis and Jerry Lee were just 21, while Cash and Perkins were 24 — so in the show, you get a glimpse of what it might have been like to see them before they were fully formed artistically, and in terms of their stage personas.

Tobin Hissong directs the two hour production with an emphasis on the musicians’ shared sense of camaraderie. For one consequence of their youth in this moment is that the Sun session happened on the heels of Elvis, Perkins and Cash spending time touring together on the road, so they knew and respected each other. Jerry Lee, meanwhile, is like the pesky, attention-demanding baby brother who arrives on the scene and cockily assumes his place among them without asking permission.

Sapieyevski effectively conveys Lee’s unapologetically brash spirit, just as the other male leads embody their familiar characters without relying on slavish imitation. Shore imbues Cash with the Man in Black’s trademark, deep-voiced gravitas; Canty communicates Perkins’ sense of being the frustrated, overlooked middle child in this talented pack, while his impressive guitar licks shine through a number of the songs; and White delivers Elvis’ distinctive sneer, dance moves, and phrasing just right without pushing it too hard.

*Quartet* is unique in that the actors are their own orchestra, backed on stage by music director R. MacKenzie Lewis (as Perkins’ brother Jay) on bass, and drummer Billy Harrington. Sound and lighting designer Dustin Miller helps give “Quartet” its intimately personal rock concert vibe, and set designers Thalia Schramm and Greg Brand, by way of the white-with-green-trim studio’s modest, utilitarian look, make Phillips’ claim that the studio was previously an auto parts store believable. Plus, the row of oblong windows along the top of the set allow Miller to use bold colored lighting during some numbers to

build a particular mood. And Sharon Larkey Urick's costumes take a cue from the actors themselves: the clothes embody these artists' personality without getting too fussy with the details. Cash, of course, is all in buttoned-up black; Jerry Lee wears a loud print with oversized slacks that allow for his gymnastic piano-playing; Perkins sports a quieter, workmanlike print with dark pants; and Elvis and Dyann bring the brightest splashes of color to the scene, with White in an off-white jacket, purple button down shirt and white pants, and Weickel in a knee-length fuchsia frock.

The narrative connective tissue of "Quartet" often feels self-conscious, and not every number seems to earn its place. Weickel, for instance, performs her songs beautifully, yet it also feels as though Escott and Mutrux were looking to justify (or beef up) Dyann's presence in the show by way of including "Fever" and "I Hear You Knocking" – especially since, while standing around a recording studio, these four titans of rock never suggest that perhaps Dyann should be Sam's next big discovery.

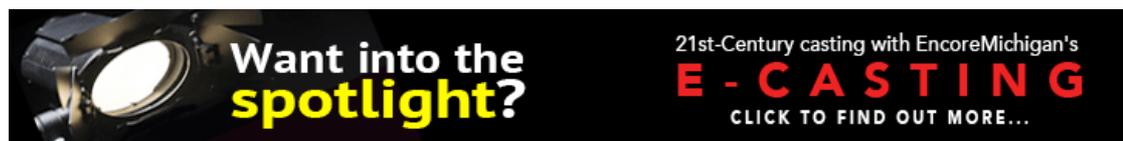
Interestingly, the tunes that hearken back to the real Sun Studios session – "Brown Eyed Handsome Man," "Down By the Riverside," "Peace in the Valley" – land with the biggest impact at Encore. But of course, it's just fun to hear so much great music performed live in one evening. Yes, lots of Boomers populated Encore's opening night crowd, enjoying this musical trip back in time; but it should also be noted that my nine year old daughter, who'd never heard these four artists' music before, turned to me during Shore's rendition of "Sixteen Tons" and exclaimed, "These songs are awesome!"

Spot on, kiddo. Spot on.

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