

Review:

On a bigger stage, 'Million Dollar Quartet' is still a blast



Kavan Hashemian plays Elvis, with Courtney Mack, back from left, Bill Scott Sheets, Zach Lentino, Scott Simone and Adam Wesley Brown in "Million Dollar Quartet" at the Paramount Theatre. (Liz Lauren photo)

Kerry Reid, Chicago Tribune

For nearly eight years, "Million Dollar Quartet" packed the intimate Apollo Theater in Lincoln Park. The story of the fabled night that four giants of

popular music all turned up in Memphis' tiny Sun Studios obviously struck a crowd-pleasing chord.

So how does it stack up in a big proscenium house like Aurora's [Paramount Theatre](#)? Judging by the whole lotta shakin' that went on Saturday night? Just fine, thanks. Director Jim Corti's production raises the rafters, but also knows when to pull back and let some of the quieter interactions between the big names and soon-to-be-stars nurtured by producer/impresario Sam Phillips have their unvarnished and unguarded moments.

In a way, this production stands as a metaphor for the underlying story in Colin Escott and Floyd Mutrux's book. Escott and Mutrux take artistic liberties with what actually happened Dec. 4, 1956 — the night that Elvis Presley, [Johnny Cash](#), Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis all got together for an impromptu jam/recording session. (The events depicted here played out over several months, not two hours.) But the tale of stars spinning out of the orbit of the sun that birthed them is a familiar showbiz narrative.

What this Paramount production proves is that getting bigger doesn't always mean selling out. If you had a good time at the Apollo, you'll find good rocking at the Paramount with a top-flight cast. Even those who generally frown at the "jukebox musical" genre should find plenty to applaud in the terrific performances, which walk the line by delivering the original stars' familiar intonations and mannerisms, without falling into the trap of pure mimicry.

In many ways, the story feels impossibly nostalgic in the age of auto-tune and streaming media. Phillips, like Chicago's pioneering Chess brothers, is a misty reminder of when independent producers were just beginning to understand the power of cross-hybridization among country, blues, gospel and the emerging language and primal energy of rock.

Nicholas Harazin's Sam Phillips tells us early on "There's a cussedness about me," and we believe that he is the kind of guy who would drive thousands of

miles (and pay thousands of dollars) to get his artists on the air. Harazin's zesty and defiant narration and his own hip-swinging glee as the songs pour out show us a man who knows the value of a dollar, but prefers the pure joy of creating great hits.

"If you ain't doing something different, you ain't doing nothing," Harazin's Phillips tells Elvis, in one of the flashback recording scenes embedded in the show. But as the evening unfolds, it's clear that doing something different means something, well, different to his stars than it does to him.

Elvis (Kavan Hashemian) has already left the building for the greener pastures of RCA and an abortive stint in Las Vegas, but pines for the simpler times at Sun. Johnny Cash (Bill Scott Sheets, whose supple baritone gets a particularly fine showcase in "Sixteen Tons") is about to leave Phillips, who refuses to let him record a gospel record. And Carl Perkins (Adam Wesley Brown) is also frustrated — particularly since everyone who saw Elvis on Ed Sullivan's show thinks Presley wrote "Blue Suede Shoes."

The bottom line is that, while Phillips is a genius at making records, he's not so good at marketing them. Sheets' Cash wearily observes "If they want to stop the spread of communism, they should let Sam distribute it." We know all these guys are going to end up in the pantheon of rock 'n' roll greats — but the 20-something hungry kids we see here don't have that crystal ball.

Meantime, Jerry Lee Lewis (Gavin Rohrer), the new kid from Ferriday, Louisiana, isn't letting the higher profiles of the other men cow him. "Eighty-eight keys beats six strings," he boasts — and by the time he closes the show with "Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On," it's clear that the House that Sam Phillips Built still has a sturdy foundation of talent to last beyond this legendary night.

Hashemian and Rohrer are vets of regional productions of "Million Dollar Quartet," and in the latter's case particularly, that may account for his scene-

stealing ways. But Jerry Lee is by design the crowd-pleaser. While Elvis and Johnny wrestle with their consciences and Carl fights the green-eyed monster of envy, Rohrer's Jerry Lee flirts outrageously with Elvis' girlfriend, Dyanne (Courtney Mack, who holds her own with smoldering renditions of "Fever" and "I Hear You Knockin'") and predicts his own bright future.

Zach Lentino and Scott Simon as Brother Jay and Fluke — the bassist and drummer for Perkins — deliver rip-roaring back-up, while subtly suggesting the plight of the overlooked session players. (Lewis is supposed to be a session player here, but of course there's no holding him back.) Kevin Depinet's detailed set is a nifty simulacrum of the original Sun venue that offers a sense of close quarters on the large Paramount stage.

What Corti and his company create is a rich and enjoyable snapshot of an emerging American musical idiom, created by poor white men who in many ways took what they learned from poor black men who never got the same shot at stardom. It's not entirely faithful to fact. But it gives us a chance to enjoy some bone-shaking, soul-stirring, good-time classics with a surprising amount of grit and soul.

Kerry Reid is a freelance critic.

ctc-arts@chicagotribune.com

Review: "Million Dollar Quartet" (3.5 stars)

When: Through Oct. 29

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes

Tickets: \$36-\$64 at 630-896-6666 or **paramountaurora.com**