

British Theatre Guide

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Buddy

Rob Bettison

Theatre Royal, Newcastle & Touring

(2007)

As the curtain raises, an almost proscenium-like structure stands on the stage covered with faded pictures from the wonderful fifties: huge faces of clean-cut American teenagers (this was the era that 'invented' the teenager) and advertising images such as the infamous Campbell's Soup advertisement - which strikes a rather cynical chord unfortunately.

The show follows Buddy (Matthew Wycliffe) as he struggles to reach the top of the music industry whilst retaining his musical identity. Along the way, Buddy faces racial issues with the 'coloured' audience, tension and finally a split with his band The Crickets. Buddy also gets married and finally gives the performance of a lifetime at the Surfer ballroom on February 2nd, 1959 - the same night Buddy and his two musical pals, the Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens, board the ill-fated plane that will cut their lives short.

Although Buddy is a relatively simple story, it is in fact, a difficult play to watch. The writing is disjointed and messy with its direction trying to keep up with such chaos. Lighting and sound effects desperately try to hide the obvious holes in the production. This all leaves the audience with (pun intended) no sense of direction as they are constantly built up and then left hanging. A prime example of such frustration is when Buddy and the band come up with the song 'Peggy Sue' showing wonderful camaraderie within the band and also extending our attention to Buddy Holly's great skills of integration and improvisation. The song 'Peggy Sue' becomes clear to us and that personalised knowledge helps us see the man behind his music. The lights go out, the huge screen lights up and the glorious drum introduction plays. The audience perched on the edge of their seats, ready to burst with the first lines of the song and .BLACKOUT. The lights raise and we see Buddy and his gang getting on with another song. This happened time and time again as each song came about, leaving a shuffling and weary audience trying to keep up.

Amongst this muddle of scenes, writer and director Rob Bettison seems ruthless in his cheap attempts to retain the audience using constant (and unclear) audience participation methods, a raffle-like event giving an audience member a chance to win a 'gift' and the Big Bopper's throwing of money (fake, obviously). The script for Buddy does not stand alone as a theatrical production and would die without the constant energy from the cast who have a very difficult job of driving a vehicle such as this, that just does not seem to be in good working order anymore.

Matthew Wycliffe tries his best to keep up with the unnecessary twists and turns and does flourish in the concert in the second act where he looks most comfortable and at his happiest. Particular mention must be made of Miguel Angel for his wonderfully energetic performance of Ritchie Valens, who undoubtedly stole the stage with his wiggling and cheekily lewd gyrating, and also of Gavin Barnes who had the difficult job of MC and carried it with great skill. The live music was fantastic and thoroughly enjoyable and it is probably this factor which has allowed the show to continue and still take at the Box Office.

There was a great buzz about *Buddy* when it was first performed eighteen years ago. Unfortunately, this production is rickety and one feels it has had its day. The Campbell's soup tin that is now associated with the cynicism of Warhol's 'fifteen minutes of fame' theory is sadly rather apt.

Reviewer: [V Mitchell](#)