

British Theatre Guide

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Grease

Book, music and lyrics by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey
Paul Nicholas and David Ian by arrangement with Robert Stigwood
Palace Theatre, Manchester
8–13 October 2012

Grease—it's a peculiar entity, when you think about it. A musical written in the 1970s, commemorating the 1950s and now, judging by tonight's audience, loved by a fair number born in the 1990s.

Grease, if you didn't know, tells the story of 'greaser' Danny and squeaky clean Sandy. Having had a summer romance, they now find each other, unexpectedly, attending the same senior year at Rydell High School. The year is 1959. The music celebrates rock 'n' roll and the rise of the teenager. The question surrounding Danny and Sandy is 'will they or won't they?' (end up together). Well, of course, they will.

Jim Jacobs's original 1971 story was a hard-hitting and rather bold treatment of the "invention" of Teenage in late 1950s America. The early version confronted smoking, drinking, burgeoning sexual awareness, gang violence and other forms of delinquency. To its credit, 1978's film version (starring John Travolta and Olivia Newton John), held on to most of these controversial themes.

This latest touring production offers what we might call the "porn" version, in that it doesn't waste too much time on story, preferring to cut straight to the 'money shots'—which, in a musical, are, of course, the song and dance routines. Certain of these show Arlene Phillips at her best as a choreographer (as with the cast hand-jiving brilliantly from the bleachers in "We Go Together").

The hacking away of the storyline is not without consequence. Although the show moves along briskly, the characters become cartoon-like and the major turning points in the plot have to be filled in by the audience's imagination. Quite possibly the producers have gambled (correctly) that these folk already know the plot.

As a result, we are never really drawn into the agonies and ecstasies of the love between Danny and Sandy; a loss which takes much of the joyous edge off the closing number, "You're the One that I Want".

The most problematic sequence in this respect comes when the coolest girl in the school, the hard-drinking, hard-smoking, and bitchy Rizzo (ably covered by Olivia Fines) reveals that her "friend" (her period) is late. This should be a profound scene, laden with all the pathos schoolgirl pregnancy implied in the 1950s.

Without due care, Sandy's next appearance—her image and attitude sexed-up as she makes an all-out play for Danny—can give the bizarre impression that she regards Rizzo's plight and immediately thinks 'I'll give that a go!'. The direction here is snappy, when it needed to be smart and sensitive.

To be fair, the Monday night crowd (least of all the three young women in pink satin bomber jackets, embroidered with the legend “Pink Ladies”) couldn’t care less about plot points. They’re here for good song and dance numbers—and they get them.

They also get a bonus in Russell Grant’s cameo as Teen Angel. Grant has clearly not forgotten the lessons of *Strictly Come Dancing*, and can also carry a tune. He cashes in, to hearty acclaim, on his status as Britain’s Campest National Treasure—and why not? The evening is about entertainment and the man is, body and soul, an entertainer. Bless him!

Of the principles, Danny Bayne is a popular Danny, who shines brightest when playing to his core skill of dance—most impressively with Emily Hawgood (Cha Cha) in “Born to Hand Jive”. Carina Gillespie, as Sandy, looks the part and delivers her big solo number (“Hopelessly Devoted to You”) beautifully.

If the test facing any production of *Grease* is whether the audience leaves smiling and humming the tunes, this class of Rydell High clearly gets to graduate.

Reviewer: [Martin Thomasson](#)