

Rave on

Theater League salutes the exuberant timelessness of Buddy Holly's biggest hits

By Joel Hirschhorn

Correspondent

The day the music died? Well, yes and no.

Certainly Feb. 3, 1959, is a chilling date in music history ... the day when early rock 'n' roll greats Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and The Big Bopper all perished in a plane crash near Mason City, Iowa.

But the music these men created has lived on — raved on, as Holly might say. Over the years, their tunes have played continuously on oldies radio, provided the soundtrack for countless commercials and inspired hit movies and musicals.

Holly, in particular, was incredibly prodigious, amassing eight Top 40 hits in just three years, including "Peggy Sue," "Oh Boy!" and the 1957 No. 1 hit "That'll Be the Day."

It's those timeless tunes that power

Theater League's production of "Buddy ... The Buddy Holly Story," which runs through Sunday at Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza.

The show has been a hit with audiences since its 1989 opening on London's West End, where it was nominated for an Olivier award as best musical. "Buddy" traces Holly's story from his earliest days singing country music in Lubbock, Texas, to his untimely death at age 22.

Brendan R. Murphy, as Holly, adds punch to the production. He's a loose-limbed, likable performer who bursts on stage and launches skillfully into a string of legendary Holly hits.

Murphy doesn't push for an exact Holly impression. The trademark black-framed glasses are smaller, and Murphy isn't as physically nerdy as his real-life counterpart. The charm of the performance lies in his humor and ebulliently communicative

attitude. He provides glue to a production that wavers erratically between a concert and a play, and his infectious approach ensures an evening of joyful entertainment.

Murphy's achievement is especially admirable during thinly written dramatic scenes that chronicle Holly's rise to fame as a member of The Crickets. His interaction with his bandmates — drummer Jerry Allison (David Schulz) and bassist Joe B. Mauldin (Lucas Worth) — is non-existent, and we never get to know these two musicians who climb the ladder with him.

This lack of characterization is keenly felt after Holly suddenly develops contempt for their musicianship, berates them for drinking and storms off to be on his own. Unlike the edgier, 1978 film "The Buddy Holly Story," which starred Gary Busey, many of the scenes in the musical simply

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telegraph information without dramatizing it.

Alan Janes' script is at its best when Holly meets his future wife, Maria Elena (a charming Elia Saldana), and instantly proposes to her. Although he never seems organically connected to The Crickets, his love for Maria has palpable warmth and humanity. Maria's premonition of disaster about her husband's final tour supplies suspense, even though the audience is well aware of the final outcome.

"Buddy" doesn't milk the trio's tragedy, prefacing it with such a lengthy, upbeat concert that their grim fate seems almost incidental to the action. This is a wise choice by director Stephen Moorer, because the show, beneath its barren biographical pretensions, is an upbeat tribute to trailblazing music.

Review

"BUDDY ... THE BUDDY HOLLY STORY"

Theater League performs the musical at 8 p.m. March 11 and 12, 2 and 8 p.m. March 13 and 2 and 7 p.m. March 14 at Civic Arts Plaza, 2100 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd., Thousand Oaks. Tickets, \$36.50-\$45.50, are available in person at the box office or through Ticketmaster, 583-8700 or <http://www.ticketmaster.com>. Call 449-2787 for information.

There's irresistible energy in the performances of "Peggy Sue," "That'll Be the Day" and "Maybe Baby." Murphy's Buddy is particularly moving when he sings "True Love Ways" to his wife, accompanying himself on guitar.

Spencer Wilson brings excitement to a Big Bopper interpretation of "Chantilly

Lace," but the production's exhilarating surprise comes when Davitt Felder (portraying Ritchie Valens) consumes the stage with an explosive rendition of "La Bamba." Felder, a folk-rocker who's making his theater debut in the Los Angeles area, is such a knockout that one wishes he had a bigger role in the show.

As Crickets manager Norman Petty, John Mario effectively gives the opportunistic character an ominous undercurrent, and Erin Bennett, playing Petty's wife, Vi, scores in a sequence where she reveals her bigotry toward Holly's Latino bride.

Allison Bibicoff's choreography packs a wallop during a wildly athletic swing dance routine, and Don Dally deserves credit for fine musical direction, which spotlights Holly to great advantage and makes it clear why, in 1986, the pioneering singer-songwriter was voted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.