

By KURT BEGALKA - kbegalka@shawmedia.com

Review: Don't be scared of stellar "Rocky Horror" at Raue

One word comes to mind after seeing the debut of the Williams Street Repertory's "The Rocky Horror Show:" Wow.

As a Crystal Lake native, I feel qualified to say this is not the type of show you typically find in McHenry County. And for that, this upstart professional theater group deserves my thanks and your support. If you want local theater to continue to push the boundaries, you must be willing to go through the door and buy a ticket. After all, seeing a Chicago-quality show for between \$22 and \$28 is a bargain.

About 300 people attended the weekend shows Friday and Saturday.

"We've been happy with the attendance," said T. Paul Lowry, producing director for the Raue and Williams Street Rep. "We're not expecting it to be packed right up front and the people who did show up really enjoyed it."

Boy (or is that girl?), did they.

As you would expect, many guests showed up Friday night wearing fishnet hose, spiked hair, crazy make-up and various props. However, staff did a good job of shelving rolls of toilet paper and minimizing water spray bottles. Instead, it sold \$3 goodie bags filled with bubble liquid, newspaper, flashlights, a kazoo, confetti, a bell and cards ... with an instruction sheet on when to use them. When Frank N. Furter sings "cards for sorrow, cards for pain" the cards flew; a trump for audience participation.

I also liked that performers extended the action, just enough, into the audience.

The story is about a newly engaged couple who breakdown in an isolated area and must pay a call to the bizarre residence of Dr. Frank N. Furter, a self-proclaimed "sweet transvestite" from Transsexual, Transylvania. OK, it's not "State Fair." I get it. But it is a weird, rollicking and fun theater experience.

Actor John Cardone of Chicago is amazing as Dr. Furter. Not everyone can sell such a difficult role, and do it wearing women's lingerie. In fact, "Rocky Horror" showcases a lot of skimpy outfits – although no nudity. Those scenes are handled deftly using video and a translucent "scrim" screen. Suffice it to say, the audience gets the message and the cast gets to keep a shred of modesty.

"We asked everybody at the audition point [about the costume requirements], " Lowry said. "I said this is what we're doing. Are you OK with wearing bikinis and underwear on stage. That wasn't a problem. Although, all of them are on diets because of it."

Sure, the costumes are atypical and the plot is bizarre. But "Rocky Horror" fans already know that going in. No, they're there for the experience. And, above all else, they are there for the music. And on those scores, Williams Street Rep accomplishes it's goal. Outside of a few choreographic missteps and some band audio issues (which I'm told have been fixed), this group of mostly local actors and actresses hit on all cylinders.

Woodstock resident Sarah Gerloff (Janet Weiss) and Brian Spengel of Crystal Lake (Brad Majors) have remarkable chemistry on stage. They also harmonize well together, assisted by a remarkable five-piece band. It was especially nice to hear Brad's soulful solo, "Once in a While," that was not in the U.S. version of the movie, and group number, "Super Heroes."

All of the music is wonderful – from "The Time Warp" to "Dammit Janet;" from "Hot Patootie – Bless My Soul" to " Science Fiction/Double Feature." The latter is performed by the versatile Amy Ferraro of Wauconda, who handles the roles of the usherette, Dr. Scott and Eddie.

"I knew I wanted Amy to be a part of the show. She is such a good character actor and has done a lot of different stuff," Lowry said. "I knew we're sacrificing a dominant Meatloaf voice, but I wanted her to have all three roles. ... It wasn't that we couldn't find a guy for it."

Finding the right cast members definitely was not a problem for this show. The group meshes well. The leads perform admirably, as do Amanda Flahive (Magenta), Kate Hein (Columbia) and Mark Mahallak (Riff Raff). Mahallak, of Crystal Lake, brings the right mix of creepiness and humor to the role as the good doctor's assistant. Kudos also to the Phantom chorus, which brave quick costume changes and hip-shaking dance scenes to provide visual depth and harmony.

Add to this cadre of good voices and solid acting, an innovative set design, great lighting effects, a narrator (Frank Gaughan of Crystal Lake) – who sold the part with a mix of Wellsian dominance and comedic timing – and you have all the makings for a legacy performance. The public just needs to show up.

"The Rocky Horror Show"

When: 8 p.m. Oct. 27-28; 8 p.m. and midnight Oct. 29.

Where: Raue Center, 26 N. Williams St., Crystal Lake.

Tickets: 815-356-9212 or visit www.rauecenter.org.

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