

THEATER

Oh What A Night!

'Jersey Boys' Settles Into The National Theatre

ARTICLE BY BRAD HATHAWAY | PHOTOS BY JOAN MARCUS

There's a show playing here in Washington this month that offers the double barrel sensory blast that is unique to the very best of Broadway musicals. While the tickets aren't noticeably cheaper than they are on the "Great White Way," at least you can save the time and expense of going all the way to New York.

The national touring company of "Jersey Boys," a musical based on the story and the music of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, has settled into the National Theatre on Pennsylvania Avenue for a run that goes well into next month – Dec. 12 to be precise. Having seen the show both on Broadway and at the National, I can tell you that the show here delivers every bit of the punch that you get from the original 2006 Tony Award Winner on Broadway.

That original was and is a fabulous show, which now, four years after its opening, is still a sell-out hit. The New York version has sold over two million seats, and the box office take is now approaching a quarter of a billion dollars. Part of the reason for success up north is the producers' care in casting replacements as the original stars moved on to other projects (taking their Tony Awards with them). The same care is apparent for this tour, with a fabulously talented Joseph Leo Bwarie contributing a spot-on impression of Frankie Valli's unique range from tenor to falsetto in front of Matt Bailey, Steve Gouveia and a sharp Josh Franklin as the other "Seasons." Franklin turns in a notably nimble performance as Bob Gaudio, the member of the group who wrote the music for such hits as "Sherry," "Walk Like A Man," "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" and the song most everyone thinks of as "Oh, What A Night" but was actually

titled "December, 1963." (Just why is made quite clear during the show.)

"Jersey Boys" is not just a "juke box musical," one of those paste-together jobs that try to make an evening's concert into an evening's theater. Often, these are less than satisfying efforts to build a show on the catalogue of a star, group or composer. Elvis Presley's songs made up the score of "All Shook Up." The Beach Boys catalogue filled "Good Vibrations." John Lennon's songs formed the basis for, well, "Lennon." None made much of an impression and none lasted very long on Broadway.

There have been successful "juke box musicals." The ABBA songs of Ulvaeus and Andersson were the

basic structure for the fictional fantasy story of "Mamma Mia!" and the 1950's and '60's hits of the songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller hit again with "Smokey Joe's Café." But not before "Jersey Boys" had there been a smashing success of an honest and accurate biographical play about the singers who made real hits. The secret here is that "Jersey Boys" is both a solidly constructed musical play and a great presentation of a huge collection of hit songs.

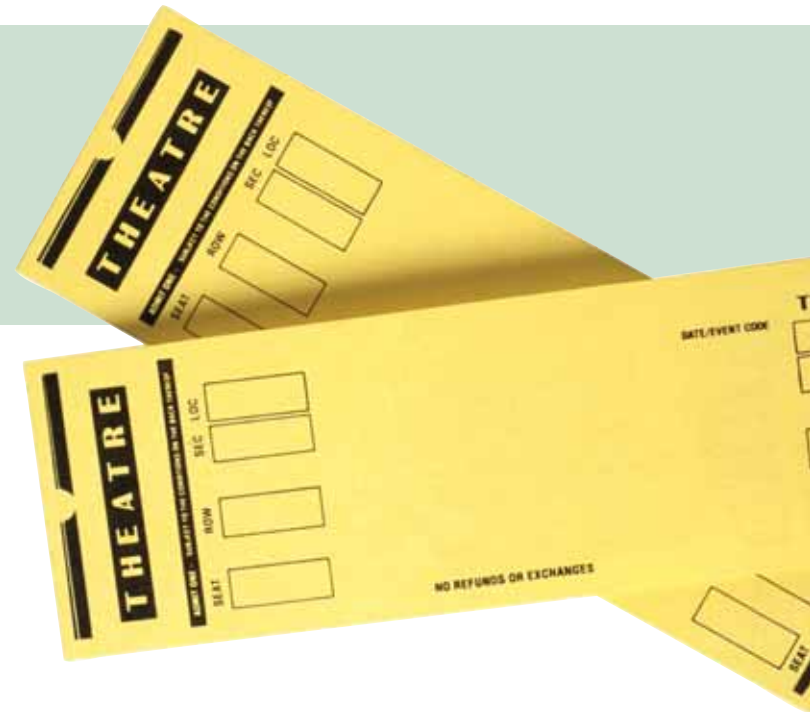
"Jersey Boys" delivers all the

punch and energy of the Four Seasons' hit songs, as well as the considerable volume of today's pop music performances. But it offers something more – a compelling story well told.

Playwrights Marshall Brickman and Rick Elice don't pull a lot of punches in telling the sometimes sordid story of the climb to stardom of these boys from New Jersey, or the less than choir-boy behavior that marked their time at



The cast of "Jersey Boys" fills the National Theatre with the sound of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. (l to r) Josh Franklin, Joseph Leo Bwarie, Matt Bailey, Steve Gouveia. PHOTO: Joan Marcus





Joseph Leo Bwarie as Frankie Valli sings "Can't Take My Eyes Off You." PHOTO: Joan Marcus

the height of success. As one of the "Boys" says in the show: "None of us were saints. You sell a hundred million records and see how you handle it!" There are incidents of theft, jail time, gambling addiction, mafia involvement and, not surprisingly, sex. But Brickman and Elice don't seem to be doing some sort of tabloid hatchet job on their stars. Instead, they are telling a human story of dreams, hopes, successes, failures and not a few tragedies along the way.

Director Des McAnuff, who put together such other Broadway successes as "The Who's Tommy" and the revival of "How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying," was in charge of the development of this show from its very beginnings at California's La Jolla Playhouse, where he's the artistic director. He uses a simple-seeming set of scaffolding that slides into different configurations. But seeming simple isn't the same thing as being simple.

The numbers behind the touring version tell the story of just how complex an effort it takes to tell this story so fluidly. The tour arrives with 19 actors, 10 musicians, a crew of another 19 (plus a souvenir seller), over 500 lights, 65 microphones, 120 speakers and nearly 200 costumes. The complexity becomes clear when you contemplate that 10 of the members of the cast play multiple roles – no fewer than 118 of them! Each requires at least a slightly different look to the costuming, and some feature different wigs, postures and attitudes.

The show is becoming a mega-industry. With the Broadway production continuing

its near-sellout run, a Las Vegas production began an open-ended run last year at the Palazzo, and a Chicago version is now slated to run through next year. There are productions in London and Melbourne while another production, which opened what was supposed to be a limited run in Toronto over a year ago, is still going strong. Indeed, two of the stars of that Toronto production are now headlined here, Bwarie as Frankie Valli and Steve Gouveia as Jersey Boy Nick Massey.

The fact that the show was booked into the 1,700-seat National Theatre rather than the larger, 2,300-seat Kennedy Center Opera House is a real plus. The show was originally designed for its Broadway house, the August Wilson Theatre on 52nd Street, which seats just 1,222 in a very intimate, close-in configuration. Its balcony is so close to the stage that the front of it overhangs just the 11th row of seats in the orchestra. So, too, the National is a smaller, intimate house with just 1,700 seats and a balcony where the front row

overhangs the 15th row of seats in the orchestra, the experience of the show is very much the same as it is in New York.

Nowhere are the tickets particularly cheap – in New York, the eight shows a week are selling out with an average ticket price topping \$115. But tickets here at the National range from \$51.50 to \$111.50, although seats are getting harder and harder to get as the run continues to sell well and people spread the word of what a good time the show turns out to be. There are also premium seating tickets for a higher price: \$151.50 to \$215. You can buy them at the box office (they are open Mon-Sat from 10 a.m.-9 p.m. and Sunday noon-8 p.m.) or pay extra fees to purchase them from Tele-Charge by phone (1-800-447-7400) or online at www.telecharge.com.

Brad Hathaway is the editor/reviewer for Potomac Stages, a website and e-mail service covering theater in Washington, Maryland and Virginia (www.PotomacStages.com). He has written about theater for Theatre.Com, Musical Stages Online, The Connection Newspapers and such magazines as American Theatre, Show Music, the Sondheim Review and Live Design. He is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association and serves on its executive board. He and his wife live on Capitol Hill. He can be reached by e-mail at Brad@PotomacStages.com. ★

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