

'Jersey Boys': Almost Too Good To Be True (Oh What A Show!)

Written by

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One could be forgiven at the opening of "Jersey Boys" for thinking they'd walked into the wrong theater.



The musical about four boys from New Jersey who rose to the top of the music world 60 years ago starts with a trio of scantily clad dancers and a French rap star singing "Ces Soirées-La."

But the tune is unmistakable, no matter the language of the lyrics — "Oh What a Night," one of The Four Seasons hits from the 1960s. Almost 40 years later, in the year 2000, the hip-hop version spent 10 weeks at number one in France.

That fact alone speaks volumes to the strength and timelessness of the music made by Frankie Valli (Hayden Milanese), Bob Gaudio (Jason Kappus), Nick Massi (Brandon Andrus) and Jimmy DeVito (Colby Foytik), the heart and soul of the story of "Jersey Boys." (Note: Milanese performs the Valli character for the matinees, while Brad Weinstock normally handles the role. If Milanese is considered the second-stringer, then please, bring on more of these unheralded vocalists.)

The mostly over-50 crowd at Sunday's matinee showing at the AT&T Performing Arts Center was familiar with the music, and understandably so — in all its iterations, The Four Seasons have sold more than 175 million records, and the single "Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You" is said to be the fifth most-played song of the 20th century. Yet it's hard to imagine how anyone of any age would not be seduced by this sometimes touching, often hilarious and ever-engaging story of one of the greatest acts in rock 'n' roll history.

After the hip-hop intro, the story evolves into an on-stage chronicle of the group's history, basically broken up into four parts. DeVito and Gaudio narrate the Spring and Summer of their story, Massi the Fall, and Valli the Winter. Through it all, there is anger, passion, loss, joy, frustration, revelation and flirtation — and that's just the songs.

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The musical also explores the excesses and tribulations of fame. As the quartet’s unbreakable bond slowly crumbles, Massi’s spare, dry-humored character says, without a hint of irony, “We weren’t saints. YOU sell 100 million records and see how it feels.”

One of the high points of the show is seeing the characters interact, how they support each other, how the sum of their collaboration is greater than its parts. DeVito, the original leader of the group, sees Valli’s potential and brings him into the band. When DeVito ends up in jail for six months, Massi uses his innate sense of harmony and understanding of music to develop Valli’s talent. When Gaudio arrives, his songwriting skills add the missing ingredient that pushes them to fame and fortune.

Through it all, the audience hears Valli’s voice mature, from the raw, skinny falsetto of a 16-year-old named Frankie Castelluccio to the soaring songmaster he would later become as both the de facto song leader of The Four Seasons and ultimately the name above the title — “FRANKIE VALLI and The Four Seasons.” He begins as a nasally-voiced wannabe with a smattering of talent and winds up with a stunningly unique voice.

There are many surprises along the way — some happy, some sad, some heart-wrenching — but one sticks out first and foremost. Early on, another Jersey boy, Joe, comes up to Tommy one day and says he can set up a meeting with a kid that’s a great musician and a songwriter who can sing — the whole trifecta. What becomes so surprising is not who Joe has in mind — Bob Gaudio — but who Joe turns out to be. It’s a funny and welcome surprise, and ultimately one of those twists of fate that turns out to be stranger than fiction.

What may be most evident, however, is the love, especially the affection these four kids from Jersey show for one another, even as they slowly break apart, only to come back together for the finale. It’s almost too good to be true — and yet it is.

“Jersey Boys” runs approximately 2 1/2 hours, with a 15-minute intermission. The show contains smoke, gun shots, strobe lights, drug references, sexual situations and authentic New Jersey language — in other words, lots of four-letter words.

Performances continue through July 15 at the AT&T Performing Arts Center. For more

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information, visit:

www.attpac.org or www.jerseyboysinfo.com/tour/index.html

NOTE: Frankie Valli will perform live at the Winspear Opera House for one night only on Sept 28, 2012., <http://www.frankievallifourseasons.com/>

Tickets start at \$53.