

“Million Dollar Quartet”

By Colin Escott & Floyd Mutrux

At the Hippodrome Theatre through December 2

By James Cooper

MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THIS ... PRODUCTION

Flashing lights, shimmering jackets and long musical solos radiate through the production of “Million Dollar Quartet,” now at the Hippodrome Theatre. Though the special effects and costumes are beneficial in some instances, the show lacks emphasis in the one area it should stress the most: the music. The whole story focuses on the decisions of four major musicians from the 1950s: Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley. Music is the main concept within the script, but it certainly isn’t the main concept within the performance.

The show focuses on a single event: the night that all four musicians of the “Million Dollar Quartet” were present in the same space at the same time, the Sun Records Studio in Memphis on December 4, 1956. Elvis (Cody Slaughter) used to be a member of the Sun Records family but then he switched to RCA, a bigger label. Since this change, Elvis has lost contact with his former producer, Sam Phillips (Vince Nappo).

As Elvis returns with his girlfriend Dyanne (Kelly Lamont) he makes it clear to Sam that he wishes he had stayed at Sun. Sam too wishes that Elvis had stayed, but his main focus is now on producing Johnny (David Elkins) and the up-and-coming Jerry Lee (Martin Kaye). All the while Carl (Robert Britton Lyons) has to decide whether or not he wants to leave Sun Records or move on to Columbia.

Though Sam is passionate about his work at Sun Records—the company he brought up from the rubble—he is having a difficulty deciding whether or not he wants to stay at Sun Records or accept a job offer at RCA along with Elvis. Meanwhile, Johnny has yet to reveal to Sam that he won’t be renewing his contract with Sun because he has decided to join Columbia as well. All of these events create the background for the intertwined relationships of the so-called “Million Dollar Quartet.”

The show opens with a wild performance by the quartet. The loudspeakers and flashing lights already invoke a radiant mood throughout the theater but the opening number, “Blue Suede Shoes,” presents the first instance of inaudibility. The whole number is ruined because of the competition between the accompaniment—guitar, bass and drums—and the vocalists.

Because of the thick, Southern accents adopted by the actors, the lyrics are completely jumbled. It is as if each word were indistinguishable from the next, except for the rare occasions when the actors sing so loudly that the audience has no choice but to understand what they are saying. The competitive sounds and lack of articulation make

the opening number less than pleasurable. Sadly, this isn't the only instance where the actors fail to articulate their words.

As the lights from the first number change to the opening scene, one can't help but notice that Jerry Lee seems to be there solely for comic relief. Kaye embodies a very foggy façade that can't help but remind one of Dopey from Walt Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." His excessively exaggerated piano playing becomes increasingly distracting during the next number, "Real Wild Child." The song is supposed to illustrate the raw talent Jerry Lee has, but it mostly manages to illustrate how Kaye fails to articulate the majority of his words, leaving those who don't already know the lyrics in a baffled state.

Carl showcases his talents in the next number, "Matchbox." Jerry Lee's piano accompaniment provides ample comic relief in a positive way as he plays high-register notes after he jokes with Carl before the song. He mainly uses the piano as an instrument of comedy rather than musicality. Carl feels dominant over Jerry Lee because he's been in the business longer than him. This prompts Jerry Lee to bait Carl in an annoying and asinine way, reminding the audience of a pesky little brother.

Elvis finally arrives at the recording studio with Dyanne. Slaughter is Elvis's visual twin, complete with his slicked back hair and signature dance move of raising his arm in the air while spinning his leg. Though Slaughter may look and move like Elvis, his singing is another story. In "Memories Are Made of This," Slaughter provides another instance of jumbled words that the audience can't understand, which defeats the purpose of conveying a message through song.

Slaughter's voice sounds full and doesn't lack volume, but if the audience can't understand him they're going to completely dismiss him. It is disappointing and rather annoying to witness song after song of muffled mumbling and "yodeling" calls. Before Elvis sings, Dyanne sings her solo, "Fever," another instance of a great voice diminished by lack of articulation. Dyanne is further drowned out by bassist, Jay Perkins (Corey Kaiser) and drummer Fluke (Billy Shaffer).

As the stars trickle into the small recording studio, Johnny finally arrives. As Elkins proceeds to sing "Folsom Prison Blues," it is a breath of fresh air. His voice has a great quality to it that sounds almost exactly the same as the real Johnny Cash. Elkins possesses the strongest voice in the whole show, for not only is he a great singer but also an articulate one. Elkins is easy to understand without strain and offers a good balance between his voice and the accompaniment. It is a pleasure to listen to Elkins play Johnny Cash and something one looks forward to for the rest of the show.

The use of the rhythm section to establish a mood is a great feature of the show. Kaiser and Shaffer barely have any lines, even though they are on stage the whole time, but the show would have been drastically different without them. During Sam's phone call with RCA records regarding his job opportunity, for example, the use of a steady and sharp beat by the drums proves an excellent way to provoke a sense of anticipation within the

audience. It is almost as if the drums were a piercing release of steam capped by a sharp tapping sound echoing throughout the theater. The vocal and instrumental aspects of the show were great individually but weren't balanced when together.

When the vocals of the Million Dollar Quartet stand alone it's something worth listening to. This was especially true on "Down by the Riverside." All four voices balance with the accompaniment, but their strongest point is in the end when the instruments are silenced and all that is left on stage are the four harmonizing vocals. This fluid sound rivets the audience, a perfect example of the greatness of the vocal and instrumental aspects individually. The show would improve immensely if more attention were given to balancing the instrumental and vocal aspects within the performance.

By the middle of the show one finds oneself less than amused. The narrative stakes aren't high enough to spark the interest of the audience. It seems very dull until the end appears on the horizon. Sam wants to celebrate Johnny's new contract signing but before Sam can ask for his signature, Cash tells him that he is going to sign with Columbia. Immediately afterward Perkins tells him he is going to sign with Columbia too. The whole theater grows silent with tension throughout the powerful scene.

Sam then leaves the recording studio to deliver his closing monologue about the four musicians and how he feels depressed and deserted. This scene is even more powerful than the last because it includes Jerry Lee playing "Great Balls of Fire" in the background. The skilled and upbeat piano behind the depressing monologue tears the audience in half, a sense of happiness and joy conflict with a lingering depression and sympathy for Sam.

Sam then reenters the scene having accepted Perkins and Johnny Cash's decisions. Sam wishes to take a photograph of the moment all four of "his boys" are together and creating music during the reprise of "Down by the Riverside." The boys then pose by the piano but as Sam clicks the camera the theater goes black and bright, white flashing lights stun the audience, imitating a crowd of photographers. The lights then come back up on the scene with a giant projector screen having rolled down to face the audience. On the screen is the original picture of the four musicians in the same poses as the actors while the 1956 recording of "Down by the Riverside" plays in the background.

This is by far the best moment of the whole show. It evokes happiness, depression, sympathy and amazement all at the same time. Just as the audience thinks the show is over, a rack carrying four colorful and sparkling jackets drops down from the ceiling. The actors grab the jackets and perform four closing solos. Each number is exceptionally upbeat and causes the whole audience to stand up from their seats and dance around to the retro music. It was as if the whole theater is transformed into a 1950s nightclub featuring the time period's most legendary musicians, the musicians who made up the "Million Dollar Quartet."

This show definitely has its weak points, but it surely has its strong points. The use of special effects and musical undertones to evoke emotion within the audience was quite

well done. Some of the actors' heavy Southern accents could be tempered to secure the audience's ability to understand the songs, emphasizing the show's musicality. The show brought a retro story into the modern world with some speed bumps along the way, but it was successful in making the audience feel something, allowing them to travel back in time to an upbeat 1950s recording studio without leaving the realms of Baltimore.

"Million Dollar Quartet"

By Colin Escott & Floyd Mutrux

At the Hippodrome Theatre through December 2

By Dori Coplan

MILLION DOLLAR MUSICAL

Imagine sitting in the Hippodrome with silent anticipation as the theater seats quickly fill. The lights dim and all eyes focus on the dark stage. Suddenly, the stage shines with flashing strobe lights as the famed Million Dollar Quartet performs "Blue Suede Shoes" complete with Elvis Presley's classic hip-shaking moves and pressed white suit and Jerry Lee Lewis's distinctive upbeat piano-thumping. The audience applauds, already enjoying themselves.

"Million Dollar Quartet," now playing at the Hippodrome Theatre, is everything one would expect from a 1956 meeting of some of America's favorite rock'n'roll artists: Elvis, Jerry Lee, Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins. The actors successfully perform as though they are putting on a concert, causing the audience to sing and clap along in their seats throughout the show.

Yet the plot for the majority of the show lacks substance. Throughout the majority of the show, there is no character conflict or drama. Were there not an excess of songs, the audience would easily become bored. Although this does not detract from the strength of the music, the plot is often difficult to follow since the characters break into songs that do not always relate to the story. It seems as though the plot is a thread which weakly attempts to string together the plethora of songs.

However, the weak plot does not detract from the actors' achievements. As one watches "Million Dollar Quartet," the actors do not merely play the roles; they become each artist to the point where one feels as though one is attending a live concert starring Elvis, Carl, Jerry Lee and Johnny.

To enhance the concert experience, Sam Phillips (Vince Nappo), the owner of Sun Records studio, interacts with the audience throughout the show almost as if he were the host of the spectacular concert. As Carl (Robert Britton Lyons) completes "Matchbox," Phillips saunters into the recording studio, turns to the audience and says, "Give a round of applause!" The audience then cheers, excited to hear the next rock and roll song on the playlist. Additionally, Phillip tells the story of how each artist first met him and how Phillips then made each singer successful.

The entertaining comic relief of the show comes from Jerry Lee (Martin Kaye). Still a country hick, Jerry Lee does not know the ropes of the music industry. He walks onstage in his awkwardly striped red pants with matching suspenders and assumes that he can make it big time, ignoring the technicalities of becoming a big-time artist. The other characters then tease him throughout the show. At one point, when Carl offers to get people drinks, he turns to Jerry Lee and asks, "You want a Twinkie there, hotshot?" This moment is not only humorous but also accurately depicts the hierarchy of fame. The more successful artists often look down upon the newcomers.

However, as the show progresses, this tension relaxes when the characters perform songs. The chemistry between all four artists is completely natural. As they bust out into numerous numbers in the recording studio, they remain relaxed and friendly, displaying every asset of each individual throughout the show. However, Dyanne, (Kelly Lamont) Elvis's girlfriend performs the showstopper of the evening.

In her tight hot-pink dress and matching pink stilettos, Dyanne grabs the mic and sings "Fever." The lights dim and the spotlight, as well as all the other characters on stage, concentrates on her. Lamont controls the stage with her jaw-dropping vocals and confidently sexual dance moves. Later in the show, Dyanne once again causes the audience to stare, blown away, at her confident nature as she performs "I Hear You Knocking."

The only time when the plot of the show becomes completely obvious to the audience is when Carl admits to Phillips that he has decided to sign with another record label. This moment renders the audience speechless not only due to Phillips' fallen demeanor, but also because the music stops playing.

This scene in the show is the first time where not even the bass or drums are playing. There is only complete silence as Phillips tries to absorb and then come to terms with what he has just heard. The absolute quiet on stage emphasizes the emotion and heartbreak that Phillips is feeling and allows the audience to empathize with him.

However, the show does not end there. Jerry Lee with all of his confidence stands up, turns to Phillips and declares that he will sign with Sun Records. He then sits back down in front of the piano and performs "Great Balls of Fire" while stomping his feet and jumping to the rhythm. The rest of the artists then gather around and perform one last song. Phillips grabs his camera and takes the now-famous picture of the Million Dollar Quartet which later appeared on the front pages of newspapers throughout the country.

Although the plot of "Million Dollar Quartet" lacks substance for the majority of the show, the talent of each actor justly compensates for the insufficient plot line. The audience thoroughly enjoys themselves throughout the show as they clap and sing

along to the enticing instrumentals and energetic vocals of Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley. The show ends with every character rocking out with their instruments, from standing on the piano to lying down on the bass, while still performing an exciting number. This causes the audience to leave the show with the lyrics and beat still playing their heads which erases the bitter taste of the plot. If one wants to have a fun lighthearted time, "Million Dollar Quartet" is definitely the show to see for any age.

"Million Dollar Quartet"

By Colin Escott & Floyd Mutrux

At the Hippodrome Theatre through December 2

By Abby Dohmeier

A QUARTER OF THE WAY THERE

On a cold [Tuesday night](#), Baltimore theater buffs filter into the Hippodrome Theatre prepared for the blast-from-the-past, jukebox-musical "Million Dollar Quartet." As the audience shivers in the freezing theater, up flies the scrim with the projected time, date, and brief summary of the December 4, 1956 event in which Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Johnny Cash met at Sun Records studio for an impromptu jam session.

The anticipation is palpable as four figures, each dressed in the flamboyant style of the 1950s (we're talking western shirts, bright red pants and the "cowboy" look complete with dinner plate belts and western shirts) are suddenly illuminated and the rock'n'roll melody "Blue Suede Shoes" blasts out of three electric guitars, piano, bass and drums. Unfortunately, the anticipation and excitement generated by that song's intensity are quickly squashed by a one-dimensional plot and the ad nauseam barrage of 1950s songs stacked one atop the other. That enthusiasm, however, is revived again in the musical's last 20 minutes, where the expected power and energy burst through in a moment of shining redemption.

We are introduced to the greats of rock'n'roll by the man who first discovered them, Sam Phillips (Vince Nappo). The owner of Sun Records stands in the only scenery of the play, a studio soundproofed in white, perforated tiles with a sound booth set into the left wall, a platform for the upright bass and drum players wedged in the corner and a lone piano sitting to the right. Three flashy electric guitars are perched on stands behind four old-fashioned microphones. Phillips, having already lost Elvis to RCA records and in danger of losing Johnny Cash (David Elkins) and Carl (Robert Britton Lyons), has just signed on hillbilly piano player Jerry Lee (Martin Kaye), the show's comic salvation.

As the musical meanders along, the audience looks desperately to Jerry Lee for quirky one-liners and the boundless energy expected from all four actors. His audition song for Phillips, "Real Wild Child," is a joyful and exhilarating mess of piano playing, spastic leg motions and head banging. Enter Carl, original writer of "Blue Suede Shoes," who is

desperately trying to record his next hit, while hip-swiveling Elvis, played by a remarkably similar-looking Cody Slaughter, cranks out hits right and left. Johnny oozes cool suavity and low bass notes as he plays wise older brother to the other members of the quartet. Amid this all-male cast, Dyanne (Kelly Lamont) provides some much needed variety as Elvis' latest girl, performing "Fever" and "I Hear You Knockin'."

One of the musical's main problems is the plot. What could have been an extremely interesting view into the lives of rock 'n' roll's greatest sons is dulled by lackluster dialogue and a constant reliance on ". . . Hey, Carl/Elvis/Jerry Lee/ Johnny, how 'bout you play us a song?" Despite the fact the songs are delivered by all four with good vocals, rhythm and the original style of the characters and songs, the energy is lacking and fails to arouse the audience.

Around song number 13, "Long Tall Sally," as one stretches and squints at the playbill to find the running time of the show or at least an intermission to break the monotony, one sees several people doing the same; yawning, checking phones and looking anywhere but the stage.

The plot is your basic cliché of the struggle for fame, woven in such a way as to obscure the very fascinating and unpredictable careers of the four men. For example, Jerry Lee, Carl, Johnny and Elvis all struggled with drug and/or alcohol abuse. The foreshadowing that could have been incorporated into the plot concerning the reasons and consequences of such abuse is discarded in exchange for weaker dialogue about the ups and downs of fame.

As the show begins to wrap up and the final song begins to play, audience members are already leaving their seats and heading for the door. However, that is when the heart and soul of the show is unleashed, as four sparkling jackets descend from the ceiling to the stage and are quickly donned by Elvis, Carl, Jerry Lee and Johnny. Everything that has been held back in the performance breaks free as each plays with wild abandon some of the most famous rock 'n' roll songs ever written: "Hound Dog," "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," "Great Balls of Fire" and "Party."

The choreography, which has before consisted of standing still while singing, is intensified. Jerry Lee flings back the piano stool, vaults to the back of the piano and plays *backwards* with electrifying energy and skill. Elvis breaks out his most controversial and signature moves, prompting several screams from the balcony. The gangly upright bass player slides to the front of the stage and, still playing, twists over into a backbend atop his instrument. When he rights himself, Carl climbs atop the bass where he rips blasts of rock music from his guitar.

The audience is ecstatic. What they have been expecting the whole night has finally arrived: the craziness and dynamism of the music coming alive. The previously listless, glassy-eyed audience springs up and dances in the aisles, and, seized with the gratification received during the finale, cheers for an encore.

Examining the performance of “Million Dollar Quartet” reveals a weak, single-facet plot, a lack of enthusiasm and performance after performance of mindless vocal impersonations, but the show is rescued by an electrifying finale. If the entire show had the feeling, power and passion of the final 20 minutes, I would recommend this musical for all ages. However, since this is not the case, I would suggest that only Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Johnny Cash fanatics who have no problem with what is basically a back-to-back song list of the oldies-but-goodies attend. As for younger age groups, stick to musicals with songs written in the last two decades.

“Million Dollar Quartet”

By Colin Escott & Floyd Mutrux

At the Hippodrome Theatre through December 2

By Laura Ebsworth

TEMPTATION, FORTIFICATION AND DAMNATION

"Million Dollar Quartet" is like a burnt bagel: some parts aren't so appealing; other parts are salvageable, and every time a good part appears, it makes it harder to go back to the bad part. This jukebox musical is little more than an impersonation concert with a weak storyline inserted between songs in an attempt to make it a musical. The writers would have been better off either fully committing to it as an impersonation concert or trying to find a better and deeper topic to write about. People from that era would greatly enjoy the show and should definitely come down to the Hippodrome Theatre to see it, but everyone else should seriously stop and consider if it would be something they're interested in.

The musical is all about December 4, 1956, when four superstars, Carl Perkins (Robert Britton Lyons), Johnny Cash (David Elkins), Jerry Lee Lewis (Martin Kaye), and Elvis Presley (Cody Slaughter), were all together in Sun Records, the recording studio where they got their start, for the first and last time in history. They spend the night revisiting and previewing some of the biggest hits in history, as well as revealing some of the most pivotal points of their careers in a 105-minute, no-intermission show.

When the four artists aren't playing their greatest hits, they interact with one another in short scenes. These bits of dialogue serve to develop the various conflicts between the characters. Sun Records owner Sam Phillips (Vince Nappo) not only acts in the scenes but also steps out at times to narrate the story to the audience. If any audience members arrive unaware of what occurred in the recording studio that night, they will leave with a great bit of knowledge on the subject.

The script mainly focuses on facts to drive the plot. For example, Perkins' anger towards Presley is developed through the fact that latter sang the former's song, "Blue Suede Shoes," on national television and took credit for it. Another example is Cash's awkwardness around Phillips, who doesn't know that Cash is planning to leave Sun Records for Columbia Records. Although these facts are intriguing to hear, relying on

them to carry the plot weakens the script too much for the actors to develop in-depth emotions. When these emotions are absent, the story falls flat and feels slow.

Of course, the main thing people want to see in this show are the impersonations, which are done quite well. As soon as the curtain rises, the small and down-to-earth Sun Records recording studio is alive with Cash, Perkins and Presley are standing at three separate mics performing together, Jay Perkins playing the bass, Fluke playing the drums, Sam Phillips "movin' and groovin'" in the background and newcomer Lewis sitting at the piano.

Audience members are able to instantly recognize each performer by their appearance and voice. The most recognizable would have to be Presley with the iconic styling of his black hair, but the best impersonator by far would have to be Kaye. As Lewis, he brings a spontaneity and a crowd-pleasing smart-aleck attitude every time he appears on stage.

Elkins' voice is extremely close to Cash's; it possesses the same deep and rich resonance which makes his impersonation even more convincing. However, he is trying so hard to build his character around the fact that Cash is leaving Sun Records that he acts on one level the entire show. The only emotion that translates to the audience is some form of awkwardness; this is disappointing considering how well he delivers his songs.

This problem can be seen across the board with every actor (with the exception of Kaye). All of these impersonators could have dominated if they would focus less on the facts they have to get across and more on impersonating their character. Again, this issue occurs more from bad writing rather than bad acting. An actor can only do so much with what they are given.

People attend musicals to see a story being told through singing, acting and dancing. For this story to be told, each musical number needs to be strategically placed so the story can be seamlessly told to the audience. This is a lot easier to do when the songs and lyrics are actually written for the show itself. Some jukebox musicals can be great, but what makes the great ones work is a strong storyline. These types of musicals need to have a clear purpose for why popular hits are used as major musical numbers in the show, especially when the hits are used frequently.

One could argue that the songs included in MDQ did have a purpose because of the setting of the story, but there is no clear organization in the order of the songs nor do they help move the plot onward. The public hears classic chartbusters over and over; the only way to make them work in a musical is to do something new with them.

There needs to be a new twist to the song, maybe even make the entire context of the song mean something different in order to jazz up the storyline a bit. Since hits like "Hound Dog" and hymns like "Down by the Riverside" were slapped together in a nonchalant order, the show felt like something we've seen a hundred times already. Like Sam Phillips tells Elvis, "If you ain't doing something new, you ain't doing nothing at all."

It's no coincidence that the show's most enjoyable part comes after the curtain call when the musical finally turns into a concert. The entire theater gets on their feet to sing and dance along with the impersonators.

Some audience members get so into it that they start yelling phrases such as "Go, Jerry, baby!" before each song. This part of the show flies by the quickest and makes audience members not want to leave. Older people will go crazy over seeing their teen idols in action and should definitely see it, but younger people should probably wait until a musical is made about people they actually remember.

“Million Dollar Quartet”

By Colin Escott & Floyd Mutrux

At the Hippodrome Theatre through December 2

By Sierra Farrare

DAZZLING LIGHTS, LIVELY MUSIC, A SMATTERING OF PLOT

The iconic song, “Hound Dog,” is a perfect summary of the strengths and weaknesses of “Million Dollar Quartet” at the Hippodrome. While small details like the spirited dancing and precise hip action of the real King of Rock and Roll are obviously attempted by Cody Slaughter, it is painfully evident that he is an actor and not a singer. The song is engaging and entertaining but merely an impersonation, at best. The bright lights are at times too bright and pose as a distraction from the song itself, but that is not to say that Slaughter does not have a strong presence on stage and an undisputed ability to electrify the audience.

In fact, this musical’s strongest virtue is its ability to enthrall and engage the audience through its characters; Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis (Martin Kaye), Carl Perkins (Robert Britton Lyons) and Johnny Cash (David Elkins). In addition to these strong, vibrant characters, the show’s theme of remembering where one has been as one proceeds into the future is developed quite nicely. Everything is reinforced through subtle dramatic cues such as shifts in the volume of musical numbers and slight dimming of lighting. At times, though, it feels as though the plot is desperately trying to poke through the lively musical numbers presented onstage.

The entire play is set at the Sun Recording Studio on that fateful 1956 day, just three weeks before Christmas. The story is told through many and sometimes poorly placed asides by Sam (Vince Nappo), the owner of the small, intimate studio. We first meet Carl, a man with a bitter tone to his biting remarks who comes across as a diva desperately searching for a new hit. He is adamantly trying to get his work done, while trying not to be outdone by the over-the-top Lewis.

The latter more than knows his way around the 88 ivory keys and brings a larger-than-life exuberance to the stage. He can barely remain seated at his piano as his fingers glide

across the keys, and seemingly his entire body feels every second of the music while Carl watches angrily, almost jealously, from the other end of the studio. We are later joined by the cool, calm and collected Johnny, and Elkins does a phenomenal job of simply settling into his character. From the moment he walks onto the stage, he emanates the aura of the deep bass-baritone singer himself.

Elvis soon joins the party with his girlfriend, Dyanne (Kelly Lamont). Lamont delivers a dimensionless attempt at a sensual song and does nothing to enrapture the audience. Her somewhat out-of-time and awkwardly placed efforts at providing a hip sway or two to become more physical fail miserably, and just make her look like she's trying too hard. Unfortunately, similar things can be said about Slaughter himself, who is clearly so enthralled with impersonating Elvis that he lacks any real conviction within the character.

By the 12th musical number, one finds oneself biting back sighs of frustrations at the highly overused tactic of an aside. An aside is an unspoken thought or brief comment delivered directly to the audience but unheard by the other characters on stage. Admittedly, the first few asides are quite refreshing, as they are not used as often in modern plays. But by the fifth or sixth, one feels like one is being interrupted by a tour guide at an interactive Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame Museum.

The single standout moment during the entire production is easily the reprise of "Down by the Riverside." The sometimes overpowering instruments are reduced to pianissimo and the company truly gets their time to shine. The exquisite harmonies resonate in the ears and warm the hearts of the entire audience on that chilled evening. Four musical icons, surrounding one single mic, gather under a single spotlight, filling the room with vulnerable, stripped-down vocals.

If there were ever a seed of doubt in any audience members' minds that these actors were not singing these songs or playing these instruments for themselves, it is immediately cast aside. Slaughter's rich intonation, combined with the deep rumbling of Elkins, the spirited and lightheartedness of Kaye and the slightly vivacious voice of Lyons all provide for a simple though greatly appreciated musical number. In contrast to the more rocking numbers, the instrumental backing is softer and understated for his hymn. The song is about laying down a sword and shield, refusing to study war and to put on a white robe, seemingly, of surrender. The choice of volume for the hymn is brilliant, and only helps to convey the peaceful message provided by the lyrics.

It is with this impressive musical number, however that the general lack of plot becomes glaringly obvious despite the played-out asides. Until the climactic scene where Cash admits he will not be returning to Sun Records and is, instead—like his fellow quartet member, Elvis—moving on to RCA records, the plot is almost forgotten and placed on a back burner.

Seemingly gaining courage from Cash's admission, Perkins reveals that he, too, is leaving Sun. Though deeply saddened and obviously angered, Phillips reminds the boys that they should never forget where they came from; the Sun Label is their roots—their

home. This scene is probably the best of the entire production because it awakens genuine sentiment within the audience; not only does it touch on the musical's theme of knowing your roots but the scene is also incredibly effective.

For the entire duration of the exchanges between the characters there is no background noise, no lingering notes from any of the instruments and even the audience is dead quiet. The lack of music allows the viewer to truly focus on the dramatic dialogue in this scene without any distractions.

This production's biggest weakness is its lack of consistency. Some of the time the production almost drags; at other times it becomes lively and engages its audience. There are also some occasions when the production feels like an informative but vaguely interesting lesson in a music history class; sometimes it just feels like a concert.

However, by the time the spirited finale comes thundering into the theater, the last thing on anyone's mind are any of the earlier disappointing moments. Slaughter, Elkins, Kaye and Lyons deliver performances that more than prove the truly priceless and timeless bliss of the production.

From the first curtain to the last, this ensemble proves that the decade in which the Million Dollar Quartet was at its prime was truly a decade to be remembered—through its iconic music and legendary artists. Special attention should be drawn to the fact that the actors do a phenomenal job of providing the genuine sentiment that would come with their last hurrah as a quartet and their goodbyes as they go their separate ways as people and as artists.

It's a bittersweet, though notably animated and blissful farewell; you feel thrust into that real-life December day in 1956, during which the events that inspired this play took place. The quartet simply dazzles, enraptures, stuns and exhilarates—even Slaughter, who seems to have relented in his die-hard impersonation of the King of Rock-n-Roll, captures the audience and engages the audience one last time with "Hound Dog." At long last the cast draws the audience into an almost whimsical cloud of music, swirling bright lights and joy, before sending them on their way, buzzing with animated word-of-mouth reviews of the musical—some positive, some negative.

The production ends with the iconic line, "Ladies and gentleman, Elvis has left the building." And when you follow suit, you'll feel just as lively and spirited as the entire production.

"Million Dollar Quartet"

By Colin Escott & Floyd Mutrux

At the Hippodrome Theatre through December 2

By Ben Fisher

A HUNDRED DOLLAR QUARTET

“I went to see ‘Wicked’ with my two granddaughters,” an elderly man recalls outside the bathroom after the performance of “Million Dollar Quartet.” His face crinkles up into a displeased expression. “I don’t see what the hype for those songs is all about. These songs here, these are the classics.”

That they are. An impressive lineup of 23 songs awaits the audience as four music legends, Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Johnny Cash all get together at the Sun Records studio. There they make what the projection screen, hung in front of the stage before the show, calls “rock'n'roll history.”

History itself can often be too dull a subject, with its innumerable characters and at times tedious summary, to be considered quality entertainment. The story has to be exciting or the presentation invigorating. Such a story has to be told as if it were happening in the present, with all the excitement, tension and bravado of the original event.

While the plot of “Million Dollar Quartet” (if there truly is a plot) leaves much to be desired the performers really give it their all, making the most of a nondescript show, and truly do raise “Quartet” from average to good with an impressive encore performance. Through the use of a few well done performances, “Quartet” does successfully manage to hold our attention.

The show opens up with “Blue Suede Shoes,” a lively number that gives the audience an idea of the four characters they are about watch as the leads sing enthusiastically, switching back and forth between singers. Each actor highlights his own character’s specific mannerisms, singing style and persona. A recording studio is the backdrop; a drummer and bassist are perched on a platform in the back.

The actors leave the stage and Sam Phillips (Vince Nappo), the owner of Sun Records and the studio, enters. Nappo is used as not only an actor but also as a narrator. He serves as a tour guide to the present and past events of Sun Records, where all four of the stars first made their name. He is the man reading the music history textbook, with the events being played out right on stage.

He helps relieve the stagnant nature of the set (which remains the inside of the studio for the whole show) by frequently flipping back to the past to explain how he met each member of the quartet. As an actor Nappo is nothing special and comes across as a student reading dialogue in an English class. There is some effort to add variation in pitch while speaking, but it really just comes across as an aggressive monotone. Phillips is excited for the night, when he will have his three big successes in one room (and Lewis, a future prospect that everyone knows to be another star).

Despite being the new kid in the studio, Lewis (Martin Kaye) steals the show. He introduces himself with an energetic performance of ‘Real Wild Child,’ an appropriate song for the character, who dons bright red pants and plays the piano with a feverish vigor (unfortunately his mouth cannot move as fast and much of the lyrics are garbled up

in the song). Lewis's outgoing and confrontational humor is cleverly used to expose the personalities of the other characters through fast-paced banter. This pattern informs most of the show's dialogue, save for some plot development and not-so-inspired song interludes.

An important aspect of "Quartet" is the fact that all the performers play their instruments live. This in itself is an impressive feat not usually seen in musical theater. Miming simply would not do in this show as the instruments are just as important to the characters as their voices. People do not come to watch a live show to see the actors lip sync and in the case of the show, the miming of the instruments would be just as blasphemous. They are that essential to the integrity of the overall production and the display of sheer talent from some individuals, most notably Kaye, adds marvelously to the show. This is one of the show's aspects that remains flaw-free.

Perkins (Robert Britton Lyons) is the second of the quartet to officially make an entrance, and his heated conversation with Lewis as the old star versus the new reveals Perkins as a man quite bitter about his increasing irrelevance in the music industry. His music isn't selling like it used to. He sings a song, but it is not very notable, though many of the songs crammed into the show aren't.

Next to make an entrance is Cash (David Elkins) who was the best received by the audience. He is a calm foil to Lewis and Perkins, with his soothing deep voice and nondescript black clothing. He announces his need to praise and thank God with a new gospel album. Phillips doesn't like this and points out that he has a closet of amazing gospel albums, all unsold.

Finally, Presley (Cody Slaughter) is in the building. Slaughter can be commended for his physical portrayal; he pulls off the mannerisms without doing so in an overly caricatured fashion. He is just the right type of subtle. And he definitely has the moves down, hip thrusts and other signature moves are replicated with precision. Unfortunately, his voice has nothing on the actual Elvis Presley. He achieves likeness in the lower notes but once he puts any power into his voice it becomes whiny and almost nasal, the harsh notes pale next to the originals.

What Presley really brings to the show is his girlfriend Dyanne (Kelly Lamont) who delivers a riveting performance of "Fever" in a tight pink dress. The impressive song, accentuated by Lamont's powerful, sultry vocals, ends in one dramatic high note that has the whole audience enticed in the best of ways. For being an unknown, she gives the "legends" a run for their money.

She spices up a set of songs that has all seemed to blend together. It is Lamont's "Fever," followed by the ensemble performances of "Peace in the Valley" and "Let's Have a Party" that are the standouts of the show. 'Party' turns out to be an ironic song; instead of partying, the characters will have some awkward and heated conversations ahead before the show ends.

The “climax” arrives when both Cash and Perkins announce that they have signed with Columbia Records, effectively ditching Phillips, the very man who ushered them into the spotlight (and who was hoping for newly signed record contracts from both of them). With Presley having been signed away years ago to keep the studio running, all the executive is left with is Lewis (which isn’t necessarily a bad thing as he is clearly the crowd favorite, thanks to those piano skills.)

The show closes ends with Phillips taking a bittersweet photograph of the four musicians together. The projector screen from the beginning of the show quietly lowers and the real photograph is displayed. It’s a nice little ending.

The actors take their finale bows, but they are far from done (fortunately, for it is the next number that validates the integrity of the show). In this encore, four sequined jackets fall from above and are donned by the four singers, who give one hell of a performance. The viewer can only wonder, “Where was this during the actual show?”

These songs were not made to be sung to an audience in a studio, under a single spot light. They made to be belted with gusto, with lights wildly shining off sequined jackets and the background lit up by a dizzying display of ever changing light and color. Guitars are strummed with a vigorous intensity and the upright bassist plays with his instrument sideways and Perkins perched on top.

Until this final showcase “Quartet” lacks the intense dancing, fancy stages and flashy costumes of normal musical productions. But that is what makes musical theater so entertaining. There can be a couple of downplayed, low-key songs, but for all of them to be such comes off as lackluster. Presentation is everything and it’s a shame it did not come until the last moments of this musical. But it is enough to elevate this production from “that wasn’t that bad” to “that was actually kinda good.”

“Million Dollar Quartet”

By Colin Escott & Floyd Mutrux

At the Hippodrome Theatre through December 2

By Theron Mercadel

STARS SHINE LIKE GOLD RECORDS

One scene that particularly stands out in “Million Dollar Quartet,” now at the Hippodrome Theatre, is Carl Perkins’ flashback to the first time he met Sam Phillips, the owner/producer of Sun Records in Memphis Tennessee. In stellar blue backlight, Carl mentions his trademark blue suede shoes and his original song of the same name. Carl continues to lament that the public mistook his song to be Elvis Presley’s and helped elevate Elvis to superstar status.

After both perform “Blue Suede Shoes,” the audience can hear what the original sounded like from Perkins’ guitar and also Elvis’ smoother, deeper cover. The music benefits from

the surrounding emotions pouring out of the dramatic flashback and the flashback benefits from the exciting example of the song. This attention to detail in the live music is the core of the show. Each chord on the piano and guitar is crisp and clear while never off-key; the singing is a great imitation of the original artists.

Even more amazing is the fact that the playing and singing were not recorded prior to the show to resemble the first songs but are performed live right before our eyes—and ears. Cody Slaughter and David Elkins navigate Elvis' and Johnny Cash's deep crooning as well as possible, respectively. On songs like Jerry Lee Lewis' "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin On" and Carl's "Party" the harmony is admirable.

It is evident that the actors understand their voices and how they relate to the other voices. None is straining his voice to reach a note out of their range, preventing a discordant harmony. However, it does come across as odd that four people that had never performed together can find perfect harmony with each others' voices from the start.

Adding a little feminine charm, Kelly Lamont takes on the role of Dyanne, a character loosely based on Marilyn Evans—Elvis' then girlfriend. Singing "Fever" and "I Hear You Knocking," Lamont certainly looks the part of superstar eye candy with a deep orange bob and a hot pink frock clutching her frame. Unfortunately her relationship with Elvis lacks spark. They rarely touch each other and they do not perform even a single duet.

From the way Elvis hold his acoustic guitar high up on his chest to how Jerry Lee plays the piano with a mike stand between his legs, the actors capture their models' mannerisms to make their characters much more convincing. It is a lot to sound like the stars, but the extra effort to move like them too is engaging. An example is how Jerry Lee moves his legs as though he was slipping on a banana peel the entire song.

Another is how Carl slides his hand down his guitar like it was a 12- gauge shotgun. These mannerisms separate these musicians from the other performers that competed with them and quite a few that came after them. How they moved with their songs made them worth remembering, so it was only natural that the actors add their mannerisms. The actors do not shy away from their bold choices and thus are able to create an amazing tableau that showcased showmanship.

The writing of the show does place the actors in an awkward position. The show is simply a concert with a few transitions between each song to push the show forward. As a result, when the next song starts it appears to be unmotivated. Even though the audience comes to hear the songs rather than to see a great display of drama, the audience needs a little break. Most of the songs are fast-paced, toe-tapping songs, which leaves us a tad out of breath.

That said the content of the dialogue is intriguing. For example, Sam Phillips reveals how he bought an early stake in Holiday Inn with the money he got from selling Elvis' contract. The content also paints the dynamic between not only the solo artists and

Phillips, but the rivalry they had with each other. Elvis was reverent and very respectful towards Phillips. However, the Quartet and Phillips treated Jerry Lee like the younger brother, because he was new to the business and had not reached the charts yet. This relationship allowed Jerry Lee to drop in a few comic moments.

Accenting the show itself are big, vaudeville-esque designs. There are lights on-stage that move to the rhythms of each song. The way they flash intensify the excitement of Carl's electric guitar and Johnny's blues. They are extravagant enough to be noticed, but not so much that they overpowered what is happening on-stage.

The recording studio has many realistic details; it has paneling to sound proof the room and dark tint in the trademark glass to the engineer's lab. Through that glass one can see the tape recorders spinning and lights flashing as though Sam Phillips was actually recording that night. Though it had all of the necessary equipment it was true to Sun Records' reputation. It did not appear gaudy or state-of-the-art even by '50s standards.

"Million Dollar Quartet" is a terrific show. This show may not be a great drama such as "Phantom of the Opera" or "Hamlet," but it does invite its audience to twist and sing along to the songs they know. A jukebox musical like this one is a rare find, because legends as big as these rarely meet to simply play the music, especially musicians whose work roots itself in the same place. Without that toe-tappin', hip shakin' music this show would be a hollow shell.

"Million Dollar Quartet"

By Colin Escott & Floyd Mutrux

At the Hippodrome Theatre through December 2

By Deshaun Steele

A QUARTER FROM MILLIONS

As the great guitars, precise piano and brilliant bass break into song, the marvelous musicians of the jukebox musical "Million Dollar Quartet" takes you back into the era of Elvis Presley and the 1950s. The flashing strobe lights and remarkable tunes take you from the Hippodrome Theatre in 2012 to the studio in 1956 where these rock n roll legends began their careers.

Regardless of our previous inclinations, this introduction grabs us right from our seats into the play. The show begins with Carl Perkins' "Blue Suede Shoes" without any formal introduction. "Blue Suede Shoes" is a story told in an upbeat tempo by Carl about how such a small item can seem so significant in someone's life when they come up with little to nothing. Once the song ends the excitement dies quickly as the owner of Sun Records, Sam Phillips (Vince Nappo), gives an explanation of what occurred on December 4, 1956.

The musicians are the main attraction to this play more than the dialogue and stunts, for music can express emotions that words cannot grasp. Several times throughout “Million Dollar Quartet,” Johnny Cash (David Elkins) has a difficulty expressing himself in words. When Johnny tries to explain to Sam that that he will soon be leaving Sun Records, it is very difficult for the audience to understand how Johnny feels until he begins to sing “I Walk the Line.” The music makes this jukebox play.

The music in this play controls the audience very easily without dialogue. If a sad scene is approaching a slow, methodical song will play. The song takes those who knew nothing about rock'n'roll and makes them instant fans. Nonetheless someone who's not the biggest rock'n'roll fan may lose interest quickly, for the characters' personalities offer little that today's young people can see in themselves.

The show “Million Dollar Quartet” is about the day four rock n roll legends, Johnny, Elvis, Carl, and Jerry Lee Lewis gather at Memphis's Sun Records, which is where they were originally discovered all by Sam. Elvis and his new girlfriend Dyanne have stopped by to visit Elvis's old friends and producer. In this captured moment one can perceive how much tension is in the studio.

To make the mood somewhat less serious and a bit more appealing, humor is added throughout the play, mostly by pianist Jerry Lee (Martin Kaye). These moments bring us close with the actors and made us feel as though we are part of the scene. Throughout the “Million Dollar Quartet” Jerry does anything he can to obtain the audience's attention: as handstands, running in place, misuse of the piano and loudly declaring to everyone how he believes he is the future of Sun Records.

Kaye does a very good job at this but the consistent humor makes it difficult for the audience to take the emotional scenes seriously. I count only two emotional moments in “Million Dollar Quartet” and when they occur the audience is confused as whether to laugh or not. They have heard so many jokes and seen so many outlandish gestures that they are adjusting to a play meant for comedy rather than a jukebox.

Not all eight characters fit into the upbeat and emotional “Million Dollar Quartet.” It seems the playwright made adjustments to all parts of this play except the relationships between the actors. For example Johnny does not seem to have a relationship with anyone other than Elvis and Sam. Another problem is that only three of the actors showed much body language: Jerry Lee, Sam and Dyanne.

Other characters seem lifeless when making dialogue especially Johnny. At times during the “Million Dollar Quartet” one has to double check to ensure that he is part of the play because he does not seem to fit in. He speaks with no emotion, shows no sign of life and refuses to change his facial expression.

Another problem is the “invisible wall” between the music studio and street outside. Characters storm out of the building into a small space to the left of the studio to give the audience the idea that the characters are now away from the rest of the crew. This

concept may be a bit confusing to the younger audience who might think that the cast has relocated into another room in the studio.

The greatest misconception is the costumes and atmosphere of the play. While the set fits the show's theme the costumes do not. Only Jerry Lee and Elvis actually have costumes that matched the '50s. Jerry wears red overalls, mismatched socks and worn shoes while Elvis wears his signature white blazer. Other characters wear costumes you can easily find at almost any modern-day department store.

As a result of these flaws, the playwright's message that these legends are a great influence on where music today is more difficult to comprehend. If you were to ask anyone of youth today what's their interest the most common response would be social networking and technology. I believe if you were to take them from their typical setting and bring them to the "Million Dollar Quartet" they would be very inspired because a vast majority of today's youth is not knowledgeable about the great treasure of America's known as rock n roll.

I would not consider myself a rock'n'roll fan but I believe this playwright has transformed me and many viewers of my background into potential fans of the '50s era, making the "Million Dollar Quartet" a success. Upon leaving the Hippodrome Theatre after watching the show, I was inspired to research the '50s era, and listen to more rock'n'roll music because this playwright made me an instant fan and left me wondering what a great time that era must have been.