

Valli High May Call You: "Jersey Boys," at the Timber Lake Playhouse through August 27

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August 21, 2023



Peyton Schoenhofer, Michael Fasano, Jacob Anderson, and Keaton Miller in *Jersey Boys*

On Thursday, I made my third trek in three weeks to the Timber Lake Playhouse – this time to see *Jersey Boys*, which is about Frankie Valli & the Four Seasons' fascinating rise to fame. The show, boasting music by these early rock-and-roll legends, ran on Broadway from 2005 to 2017, winning four Tonys. I haven't seen the 2014 movie, but even if you have, see this. Seriously.

There's nothing like the energy and excitement of live theatre, and Timber Lake's production is a dazzling, sizzling thrill. Well-qualified director/choreographer John Michael Coppola had previously directed and acted in this show, and also founded a Four Seasons tribute group. He and music director Oliver Townsend brought many talented folks together to craft this exceptional experience.

Going in, I figured I'd know three or four of this quartet's tunes well, and maybe at least recognize a few more. Well, *Jersey Boys* is bursting with so many hits that I only *didn't* know three or four of them. Among its catchy classics are "Big Girls Don't Cry," "Walk Like a Man," "Working My Way Back to You," "Who Loves You," and lead singer Valli's solo smash "Can't Take My Eyes Off You." We also hear excerpts of tracks the group covered, or provided backing vocals for, in their early days. It's a marvelous approach, as that mid-'50s-era sound samples the musical atmosphere before the group made its own magic – bringing doo-wop and early rock together.

Before the production began, I'd wondered how expensive it was to get the rights for the Four Seasons' catalog. But apparently, as group member and composer Bob Gaudio conceived the musical, no sweat! (Gaudio wrote a number-two hit at age 15, and co-wrote 1957's "Silhouettes," which is in this show, as well as 1974's "Lady Marmalade" and many others.) Bob Crewe gets the sole credit on the lyrics, though others' works are included. Marshall Brickman and Rick Elice wrote the book, which whisks the action along with both laughs and drama (and contains authentic Jersey-style profanity and adult content). The pair included straight-up performances (as the bands here play for audiences), and also employed a few songs to aid the narrative, with varying success. At one point, a guy sings "I never laid a hand on you" to the mother of his children (unlikely, but he definitely laid *something* on her).

However, as one character notes in the first scene, "Ask four guys how it happened, you get four different versions." And they do hand off the narrative throughout the show. It's hard to adequately describe Michael Fasano's performance as Frankie Valli – but as it's his job to become that man, it's my job to write about it. Like Valli, Fasano is not just some guy who can hit the high notes. His falsetto is only one aspect of his rich voice, which has a compelling, distinctive, but indescribable tonal quality. (I guess words fail me, after all.) Fasano is an Actors' Equity guest performer here, has played Valli before, and has clearly fine-tuned his exquisite portrayal.

These bad boys had records even before they started singing – police records. Petty (and sometimes not-so-petty) criminal Tommy is the cocky, fast-talking guitarist who brought the group together and never lets anyone forget it, and portrayal Jacob Anderson swaggers, boasts, and fills every space with his spectacular self. Tommy's obnoxious, but I couldn't help liking him. Peyton Schoenhofer is Gaudio, the show's creator, who played piano before stepping back to compose. Schoenhofer, another *Jersey Boys* veteran, is now concentrating on film, but came back to the stage to assume this role again. The wonderful Keaton Miller makes natty, streetwise bassist Nick Massi as personable (in different ways) as he did country boy Billy in Timber Lake's previous production *Bright Star*.

Like most bands, the Four Seasons went through personnel changes, and actors playing members with shorter tenures have outstanding vocal skills matching those of Coppola's four principals. Among them are Bryant Howard, as original member Nick DeVito, and Nathan Gallop, who plays Hank. Four ladies – Annika Rudolph, Kylie Tollefson, Olivia de Jager, and Samantha Bonzi – portray groupies, mothers, wives, and more. (Three of them perform an irresistible '60s pop number you might know.) Meanwhile, *Jersey Boys'* slick, hard-working musicians play brass and reeds, as well as rock instruments.

Fun script, superb acting and dancing – yes. But the voices are why I'd been aching to see this one. The powerful, sweet blends these singers pour forth put me in harmony heaven. I sang with a vocal group for a few years, and nothing equals that joy. These boys know it,

too. Amid shouts and applause after one number, Valli (the character) smiled and bowed as usual, but as he put a hand over his heart, I also saw a glimmer of Fasano's jubilation at connecting with the crowd after a song well sung. Valli himself is touring right now, by the way. He's pushing 90. You may not catch him onstage, but this production of *Jersey Boys* will more than satisfy your '60's-song appetite.

Jersey Boys runs at the Timber Lake Playhouse (8215 Black Oak Road, Mt. Carroll IL) through August 27, and more information and tickets are available by calling (815)244-2035 and visiting TimberLakePlayhouse.org.