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Article published Jan 13, 2009

'Idols of the King' has Foothills all shook up THEATER REVIEW

By Paul Kolas TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER

WORCESTER — If a show were judged by sexual heat and charisma alone, Foothills Theatre's production of "Idols of the King" on Sunday would have melted every atom of snow and ice blanketing New England.

Jack Foltyn doesn't exactly resemble Elvis Presley, and he may incorporate a few moves in his feverishly gyrating routines that would have been censored 40 or 50 years ago, but he unequivocally embodies the munificently entertaining spirit of the King. He certainly had plenty of members of the female audience hooting with pleasure at extravagantly performed renditions of "Burning Love," "Jailhouse Rock," "Hound Dog" and especially "I Can't Stop Loving You." wandering through the crowd, shaking hands with some of the men and bestowing kisses of variable length and intensity on the ladies. And the man knows how to sing, using his voice like a beckoning, curling finger of desire. He also shows subtle warmth on "Love Me Tender," "I Can't Help Falling in Love With You" and "Softly and Tenderly," three of the show's more successfully conceived vignettes built around the musical numbers. Bill Mootos and Lynne Rosenberg play multiple roles in these mini-stories as people who either knew Elvis personally, or were devoted fans.

Rosenberg plays a showgirl in the "Love Me Tender" segment, someone who got her dancer's job at the Las Vegas Hilton with Elvis's help. As touching as her memories of Elvis are here, she's even more moving as a waitress with a fatally asthmatic child, Travis (named after Colonel Travis of the Alamo), for whom Elvis pays the burial expenses. "Softly and Tenderly" seems to carry more emotional resonance with this background story, making Andrew Andrews' somber lighting here quite effective. Rosenberg also does a nice job of shifting from a leggy showgirl to a gawky, mother-pecked, piano-playing spinster (Ruth), while Elvis sings "I Can't Help Falling in Love With You" into her moony eyes, one of the rare instances Foltyn directly interacts with the other two actors. Mootos shows his considerable versatility as a blackjack dealer who bunked with Elvis in the Army, a flamboyantly gay florist named Paul/Pauline, and a loser biker named Kevin continually at odds with his white trash, hitchhiking girlfriend Raynelle (Rosenberg). Mootos and Rosenberg squeeze a laugh here and there out of Kevin and Raynelle's buffoonish roadside antics, but their depiction of two other Elvis-worshipping couples — Darla and Ralph, and the unfortunately named Edna and Zig — makes one consider if the show's creators — Ronnie Claire Edwards and Allen Crowe — truly care about Elvis devotees or are smugly mocking them with a parade of cartoonish stereotypes. Mootos' take on a weird, paranoid conspiracy theorist named Norton, and Rosenberg's trippy-hippy Zephyr, threaten to tilt the confusing mix of affection and condescension in a more denigrating direction. Aren't there any normal Elvis fans out there?

The show's conceptual design may be uneven, but there's nothing conditional about Foltyn's pedal to the metal performance. He's a pulsating presence every minute he's onstage, a scintillating marriage of movement and voice flexing each song in unpredictable directions, working the audience into an appreciative lather. He's also impressively designed his own wardrobe for the production, from jump suits to cream-colored jackets. Director Russell Garrett keeps things moving at a hand-clapping pace, Fred Frabotta and his finely tuned orchestra stay in sync with Foltyn's fluctuations, and Lisa Pagnato's set design adds sparkle to what often feels like a very elaborate bachelorette party.

'Idols Of the King'

Written by Ronnie Claire Edwards & Allen Crowe, directed by Russell Garrett, musical director Fred Frabotta. Presented at Foothills Theatre, 100 Front St., Worcester. Performances through February 1. Tickets range from \$32 to \$38, depending on date & time of performance. Student seats are \$19. Groups of 20 or more save \$10 per ticket. Call the box office at (508) 754-4018 for reservations & performance schedule, or visit www.foothillstheatre.com online. With Jack Foltyn as Elvis Presley, and Bill Mootos and Lynne Rosenberg enacting several fans touched by his life.

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