

Good Hed

triangle productions!
pulls off *Hedwig
and the Angry Inch*
in the company's
best show to date

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

Perhaps it's best to qualify my praise of the energetic, ecstatic triangle productions! rendition of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* by relating my own peculiar experience with the massively popular queer rock musical, which has found relatively amazing success since its New York debut in 1998.

I witnessed this storied stage phenomenon in an off-Broadway theater in late 1999, well after creator John Cameron Mitchell—who wrote the show and performed as the angry, quasi-transsexual Cold War emigrant glam-rock star to an acclaim that soon approached cult worship—had ended his lengthy tenure to take on a more background, "supervisory" role.

His well-deserved sabbatical left those of us who came in late with Ally Sheedy as Hedwig, and what I saw was a joke—a meandering, muddied-sounding, seemingly endless pose-and-screamfest starring not so much Ally Sheedy as Ally Sheedy's Ego, which saw fit to rearrange and undermine Mitchell's original (and, as it turns out, rather clever and heartfelt) artistic intentions.

Sheedy improvised bad dialogue, forced other cast members to vocalize on songs meant to be sung by Hedwig and generally created a shambolic mess. She was fired not long after I witnessed the debacle, but no matter: I virulently warned anyone who would listen against what I characterized as an overrated, underbaked, pointless exercise in sub-*Rocky Horror* camp.

It wasn't until the 2001 release of the film, directed by and starring Mitchell, that I half-retracted my disappointment. It was a lovely feat of carefully controlled visual momentum, editing and sound that could never be duplicated live; if one hadn't known, one would never have guessed it had once been a play. Hence, cinematically biased me attributed the film's artistic success to the fact that it was a film, prejudicially assuming the medium itself had reined in the dull excesses allowed by the stage.

So it was with some vestigial trepidation—albeit a fairly open mind—that I attended triangle's *Hedwig*. I left the venue beaming.

Not only was it the most accomplished, entertaining triangle production I've seen, it was one of the best Portland theater experiences I've ever had, right up there with *Waiting for Godot* at Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center or Artist Repertory Theatre's 1998 production of Cocteau's *Indiscretions*.

Wade McCollom as Hedwig absolutely owns the character's decadent, cynical, wise, witty and wounded rock 'n' roll persona. He is a natural comedian (comedienne?), which now strikes me as the main deficiency of Sheedy's performance of yore; whereas her brand of "spontaneity" was self-indulgent and humorless, McCollom's, though hardly sycophantic, is very fresh, very funny, very audience-aware. He's in total complicity with us (even when the jokes are at our expense) and without a trace of self-consciousness.

This Hedwig is simultaneously hilarious, stinging and touching—a raucous combination of Courtney Love and Sandra Bernhard—with atti-



Wade McCollom is, reportedly, a much better Hedwig than Ally Sheedy

tude directed inward (embodying the character's ultimate struggle with self-loathing) and outward (implicating the audience).

Much of that effortless, here-and-now vibe is thanks to McCollom and director Dennis Bigelow's tinkering with Mitchell's text. One of *Hedwig's* conceits is that it's a rock concert taking place right now, right in front of you, though the rock star in question is undergoing a crisis causing her to be much more talkative than would be expected.

Here, the dialogue has been ingeniously altered to reflect the present, with Hedwig sardonically remarking on triangle's low budgets and propensity for exposing young male flesh in its shows. Other gently mocked local color includes the Rose Garden arena, the company's own theater space and its adjoining Belmont neighbor, the Tao of Tea.

And then there's the band. The casting of Julianna Jaffe as Yitzak, Hedwig's (male) husband, co-vocalist, bratty sidekick and straight man (in both the literal and traditional, butt-of-the-joke sense), makes a perfect counterpoint to the already bent gender of the proceedings. Todd Chatalas, as *Angry Inch* lead guitarist, plays well, as does drummer Michael Partlow. Songs come through loud yet crisp—expertly abrasive and/or melancholy as needed—all topped off with McCollom's fine singing.

The tunes, though not quite rendering your LPs of *Aladdin Sane* or *Electric Warrior* obsolete, are true to the rock 'n' roll aesthetic, especially considering their succinct rebellion against the usually much less economical traditions of musical theater.

McCollom, Bigelow and company have perfectly captured the spirit of the perfect queer rock musical, one that doesn't make those words seem like the triple oxymoron they so easily could be. Judging from the packed weeknight house, their efforts have made *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* one of the hottest tickets in town.

It really is a show that shouldn't be missed. It's a finely honed, well-executed version that finally brought *Hedwig* home—for me, in more ways than one. [C]

HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH plays 8 p.m. Thursday to Saturday through Aug. 3 at Theater! Theatre!, 3430 S.E. Belmont St. Tickets are \$22-\$28 from 503-239-5919.

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