

RADIO GA GA

ACE celebrates the songs of Queen
in the dystopian musical *We Will Rock You*

Just when you think you never want to hear “Bohemian Rhapsody” ever again, it comes on the radio and immediately you’re sucked in by the gravitational pull of those crystalline harmonies: “Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide ...”

Before you know it, you’re singing along, rehashing for the millionth time the Brechtian narrative of the prodigal son spooled out by Freddy Mercury, whose cabaret croon captures the heartsick, defiant confession of a born loser. And then comes the electron-blue crunch of Brian May’s guitar.

If the music of Queen isn’t excuse enough for a musical, I don’t know what is.

Actors Cabaret’s production of *We Will Rock You* — a musical that was roundly panned when it opened in London’s West End in 2002, but went on to run longer than *Grease* — is an unabashed celebration of Queen’s music, which maintains an unrivaled spot in the timeless canon of pop culture. These songs are imprinted on our DNA, and it’s a pleasure to behold, in one sitting, their aesthetic and imaginative scope: a cosmic jukebox that combines the retro-futurism of Flash Gordon and the operatic theatrics of Kurt Weill without forsaking the adrenalized thrust and swagger of anthem rock.

Of course, a musical must attach a story to all those songs, and *We Will Rock You* is knitted together by your standard dystopian boilerplate: Earth has been renamed “iPlanet,” and the predominance of the population (called the Ga Ga Kids) is enslaved by bow-wow technology and ruled over by the Killer Queen (Adria Malcolm), head of Globalsoft Corporation. The future, indeed, looks a lot like now.

A pair of persecuted free spirits, the romantically inclined Galileo (Chad Lowe) and Scaramouche (Lexy Neale), must unite with the Bohemians, led by Brit (Donovan Seitzinger) and Oz (CharlieRae Edmunds), to create real music with real instruments and thereby liberate humanity. Basically, mash together *Brave New World* and *1984*, steampunk it up with Queen hits, and you’ve got the gist.

It all works just fine, thanks in large part to the smart direction by Anthony Krall, who reveals a keen sense of the outsized theatrics and cheeky-earnest melodramatics intrinsic to Queen’s appeal. The sets, designed by Krall and Joe Zingo, have a nice Terry Gilliam flair, and the lighting brings out a sultry underground glow that emphasizes the show’s punk rock roots. And the costumes, by Mary Jensen, are fantastic — equal parts *Road Warrior* apocalyptic and cornball space-age mod (think Ken Russell’s 1975 film *Tommy*).

The show features a large, boisterous ensemble, and the leads — including Tyler Blaser as corporate henchman Khashoggi and Tyler Holden as the elderly archivist Buddy — are all well cast and well played. But a special shout out to Neale (Scaramouche) in her first-ever stage appearance; along with a lovely singing voice, she carries this key role with just the right amount of bemused sass and rebellious pride, especially in the second act. Her romantic sparring with Lowe gives the show a zing of teen angst and romantic tension.

With its endless references to rock history and classic songs — Bowie and The Beatles figure largely — *We Will Rock You* is driven less by its narrative than the sheer momentum of its rebel spirit. The show revels in the gritty resistance at the roots of rock-and-roll, rejecting out of hand the prefab consumerism that relegates music to mere background noise. At the same time, it takes Queen — a mainstream band if ever there was one — and gives them back to all the beautiful losers who, heaven knows, have certainly paid their dues.

One suggestion to ACE: Turn it up!

We Will Rock You plays through July 28 at Actors Cabaret of Eugene; tickets at 541-683-4368 or actorscabaret.org.

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