

Cash Business: "Ring of Fire," at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse through March 21

Written by Mike Schulz
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Friday's sensational opening-night presentation of *Ring of Fire*, the Johnny Cash tribute currently playing at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse, was the beneficiary of an awful lot of goodwill before the production even started, and very little of it actually had to do with Johnny Cash.

Prior to the performance, producer Denny Hitchcock gave a moving testimony to his wife and other supportive, patient spouses of theatre artists (there were tears on-stage and off-); Circa '21 Bootlegger Rodney Swain announced that he and fellow Bootlegger Amanda McGill had a baby boy in mid-December (Mom, Dad, and Noah are all happy and healthy); and halfway through the wait staff's pre-show entertainment, Brad Hauskins improvised a bit that allowed an audience member to propose to his longtime girlfriend - the sister of a *Ring of Fire* castmate, no less. (Amidst applause and cheers, she said yes.) Taken together, these events composed the sort of spontaneously touching and joyous prelude that any production would have a tough time

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following, and the thrill of director Ann Nieman's offering lay in how thoroughly *Ring of Fire*

's participants kept these high spirits aloft, even considering the odd and oddly unfinished nature of the show itself.

Not the *whole* show, mind you; just its second half. The *first* half is really quite strong. After the lights dim on an illuminated, center-stage visage of the singer/songwriter, and we hear a brief recording of that unmistakable baritone ("Hi, I'm Johnny Cash ... "), six

Ring of Fire performers individually introduce themselves
as

Cash, and proceed to offer first-person accounts of the legend's early history, interspersed, of course, with songs from his discography. It's a smart, clever handling of traditional bio-musical stickiness - we're spared both a deifying lecture and a predictable rags-to-riches arc - and this make-believe conceit relieves Kimberly Furness (whose sister got engaged), Katy Gentry, Steve Lasiter, Tristan Layne Tapscott, Tom Walljasper, and Lexie Wollan of any burden of vocal "accuracy"; their continually wonderful solos, duets, and group numbers pay tribute to Cash's spirit without being shackled to his style.



Did author William Meade, credited with "conceiving" *Ring of Fire*, somehow forget about the first act by the time he got around to the second? After intermission, the running first-person commentary is ditched in favor of more conventional third-person dialogue ("Johnny Cash died on Friday. He was 71."), and the narrative, which before had a graceful, logical flow, becomes clumsily structured. June Carter, who arrives at the end of Act I, is never referenced in Act II, and numerous songs and biographical tidbits - such as Cash's stance against flag-burning - appear tossed in with little regard for placement. (Following the mention of Cash's death, the

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show, strangely, continues for another half hour.)

Structurally, *Ring of Fire* starts beautifully and ends messily, but Nieman's production is so grandly enjoyable that its messiness is practically beside the point. Graced with unfussy, smoothly efficient staging and Ron Breedlove's rather stunning lighting effects - particularly the red, orange, and golden hues that bathe Act I - the show boasts one blissful highlight after another: Tapscott's dynamically engaging "Country Boy"; Nieman's inspired vertical choreography on "Five Feet High & Rising"; Lasiter's and Wollan's gorgeous "I Still Miss Someone" duet; the female ensemble's chilling "Orleans Parish Prison" harmonies; the simple, heartfelt ache of Walljasper's "Delia's Gone"; Furness, in a delightfully tacky pink-and-white frock, and her hysterical hayseed yodel in "Flushed from the Bathroom of Your Heart." (Now *there's*

a Cash number you didn't hear in

Walk the Line

.)

What makes *Ring of Fire* more than a mere collection of first-rate set pieces, though, is the sense of fun, unity, and off-the-cuff naturalism shared amongst the cast - Tapscott and Walljasper have a brief routine on Goo Goo Clusters that feels wholly improvised - and in a marvelous, magical surprise, the show's "background" musicians wind up exuding just as much personality as its leads. Singing, swaying, and joshing right alongside

Ring of Fire

's featured sextet, pianist and music director Travis Smith, guitarist Buddy Olson, bassist Justin Droegemueller (offering kick-ass presence and vocals on "Big River"), and fiddler Amberly Rosen (so breathtakingly gifted and endearing that she's practically a show unto herself) prove exhilaratingly essential to the texture, and despite spending most of his stage time awkwardly - and, being the production's only African American,

unfortunately

- hidden behind the set, percussionist John Ladson II is given a minor showcase on "Folsom Prison," and performs musical wonders with a pair of drumsticks, a railing, and an upside-down bucket.

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