

## Let Yourself Go: "All Shook Up," at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse through March 19

Written by Thom White

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Good God, is the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's *All Shook Up* fun. The high energy on stage kicks into overdrive with the first song, "Jailhouse Rock," and barely lets up as the cast sings, dances, and emotes its way through many of Elvis Presley's hits. I was thrilled with the opening-night performance, and my lingering excitement has me still smiling as I write this the day after seeing the jukebox musical.

Now I'm not exactly a fan of Elvis' music; that is to say, I wouldn't choose to pop one of his albums onto a turntable of my own free will. However, once a song of his is playing, I find I don't mind it, and even like the familiarity a bit. And in the case of *All Shook Up*, with its beautiful arrangements and choral harmonization of Presley's hits, I've found a new admiration for the King of Rock & Roll's tunes.

I'm also newly impressed with the work of longtime Circa '21 director/choreographer Ann Nieman, who comes up with some clever, sometimes unexpected choices in her dance steps. "It's Now or Never," for example, finds Nieman's choreography matching the uptempo of the accompaniment, rather than the gentler ballad of the melody. As Dean (Bret Churchill) and Lorraine (Kristen Jeter) sing tenderly of their love for each other, they dance together with quicker steps and higher spirits than the melody seems to require, and the mix creates a true impression of young romance – there's a sweet excitement in their infatuation.

Actor Michael Karraker leads this 1950s-era, *Footloose*-like story that focuses on a love heptagon. With exaggerated head jerks, knee pops, and a sometimes-curved lip, Karraker portrays his biker, Chad, as a caricature of Elvis, reminiscent of the Cartoon Network's Johnny Bravo. He strikes and holds an Elvis-like pose with such conviction, such force, that he commands the stage with his coolness, and is perhaps most impressive when grunting and grimacing his way through "I Don't Want to," as he tries to physically contain the confession he cannot keep himself from declaring through song. My favorite moments of his, however, occur when Karraker shares the stage with Heather Beck (who simply shined as the title character in Circa '21's *A Closer Walk with Patsy Cline* last year). As the initially prim Miss Sandra, Beck counters Karraker's romantic overtures with effective aplomb

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and a pitch-perfect, strong, superb singing voice.



It's Deidra Grace's Sylvia who earns my *All Shook Up* awe, though, and I'd belly up to her bar anytime for a healthy serving of Grace's spunk and sarcasm. I fell for the performer's talent on her first line, but it was her solo performance of "There's Always Me" that clinched it; Grace's delivery of the song, with a heartfelt yearning and sadness behind her extraordinary vocals, deserves a standing ovation all its own.

Also of note, Tristan Layne Tapscott once again proves himself the go-to local actor for self-deprecating humor, but also displays a knack for tender moments, moving the audience to sympathy for his Dennis' unrequited love. Kristen Jeter seems to embody the perceived '50s sensibility with a constant smile, wholesome nature, and rebellious streak that never crosses over into bad-girl territory. Jennifer Weingarten adopts the right amount of tomboyishness in her portrayal, and humorously kicks it up a notch or two when her Natalie pretends to be an "Ed." Bret Churchill's youthful charm and goody-goody awkwardness are endearing, as is Tom Walljasper's underlying sadness as Jim, a man who's lost both his wife and inner spark. And it's good to see Walljasper's real-life wife, Rachelle, gracing the Circa '21 stage, as it is seeing the consistently superb Pat Flaherty; she's devilishly delightful as the pious Matilda, while he manages to showcase his comedic ability despite not uttering a word for most of his time on stage.

Following Circa '21's recent production of *Plaid Tidings*, *All Shook Up* continues the high standard set up for the '50s- and '60s-themed shows that will follow this year. It's raucous rock-and-roll fun filled with contagious energy and remarkable talent.

For tickets and information, call (309)786-7733 extension 2 or visit [Circa21.com](http://Circa21.com).