

## ***Rocky Horror Show: Fresh, In So Many Ways***

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Okay, I confess it: I love this musical—its campiness, its outrageousness, its unabashed exuberance. Somewhere along the way, the *Rocky Horror Show* (including the movie version, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*) crossed the line from guilty pleasure (you went to a show about what?! Umm...a promiscuous, bisexual, cross-dressing alien who sings and dances while wearing a corset and five-inch heels...and seduces an innocent young couple...and creates his own gorgeous muscle man...um, did I mention the corset?) to cult classic and cultural phenomenon (meet you at the midnight showing...again). But with such familiarity comes a concern: can this troupe of players from the University of Northern Colorado's College of Performing and Visual Arts and School of Theatre and Dance, led by director Vance Fulkerson and music director Michael Ruckles, claim the show as their own? This is not simply a question of technical and artistic competence, but one of creativity and freshness.

It's a challenging problem, because the audience has become a *de facto* character in the play. An entire lexicon of behavior has developed around this play, and a performance that deviates too far from the original is unlikely to be well received.

The show begins in the theatre lobby, even though there are no cast or crew members here. The lines begin to form early, at least two hours before show-time, and half an hour out, they weave from wall to wall to wall, curling back on themselves and threatening to merge in the middle. The only time I've seen lines like this for a live show was for a big Disney musical, but none of the men in those lines were wearing bras instead of shirts.

To the uninitiated, it might seem that this audience flamboyance occurs because these audience members are theatre students and instructors, but I have seen the same costumes, the same flamboyance, in *Rocky* audiences who are engineers, medical researchers, and kindergarten teachers, and whose ages range from early teens to senior citizen.

The excitement and anticipation are palpable. There is so much adrenaline that I can taste it, and I feel my heart rate surge. Finally, after announcements requesting that we respect the players, stay off the stage, and not throw anything (all valid concerns), the doors open. The crowd is even more raucous in the theatre. Soon, individual actions become coordinated: first, the wave, ragged but soon smoothed, people rising and falling across the entire auditorium; then clapping and chanting. The audience is warming itself up, and the din is deafening, overwhelming, and amazing.

Finally, when the pressure within the theatre seems so great that the space must surely explode, the stern and solid Narrator, played by Tracy Salter, walks on stage, microphone and program in hand, beginning with what has also become part of this play: the Rocky Etiquette. Salter is in character from the moment she appears, and she is clearly comfortable with—and expects to deal with—the audience participation.

The ability of every member of the cast to gauge audience actions and respond appropriately without breaking character, disrupting timing or rhythm, and even at times improvising to incorporate unexpected audience input was remarkable to behold—in fact, two of my favorite bits in this performance came from the players' reactions and improvisations to audience calls. In the first, when Riff Raff (Keven Tyler

Sims) answers the door to let Brad (David B. Johnson) and Janet (McKayla Marso) in, an audience member shouted, “Oh my god, Mormons!” Moments later, as Riff Raff begins to exit upstage, leaving Brad and Janet in the castle vestibule, Brad takes a few steps as if to follow him and says, “Excuse me, but if I could just have a few minutes of your time to discuss the Book of Mormon...” The timing and delivery were perfect, and the effect was doubly hilarious thanks to the production of *The “M” Word* earlier this week. The second, which also played off of the issues raised by *The “M” Word*, happened during the scene where Frank-N-Furter (Jacob Mendes) is seducing Brad, and Frank says “There’s no law against it.” From near the back row of the auditorium a deep voice boomed, “There is in Wyoming!” The entire audience collapsed in hysterical laughter and Frank-N-Furter stopped in mid-move, straightened up and turned slightly toward the audience. The entire scene is played behind a curtain so that the characters are silhouetted, but Mendes’ posture was eloquent—he may not have been entirely in character, but he clearly conveyed “What am I supposed to do with *that*?” When he responded directly to the audience, Brad asked, “Who are you talking to?” Mendes dropped immediately back in character, and the scene continued.

This give-and-take between the players and audience gives the performance freshness, while staying true to the familiar form the audience expects, and it is one of the strongest aspects of this production.

The musical talent is also strong: the band (Mike Ruckles, Ansel Foxley, Ryan Ellison, John Thomas, and Matt Coyle) is onstage and excellent. Johnson’s solo in Act 2 was beautiful—the audience actually quieted down to listen—and Mendes’ singing was superb throughout. I had a little trouble hearing and understanding Riff Raff and Magenta (Jessica Carter), and although I recognized and enjoyed the squeaky voice of Columbia (Julia Perrotta), I missed almost all of what she said, whether singing or speaking. Jonathon Michael Bray as Eddie wasn’t quite strong enough to overcome a mike malfunction but he and the Narrator managed a nice save and recovery. In his first song, Joshua Rahe Buscher as Rocky Horror seemed a little off-key, but subsequent numbers were fine. Choral work with various combinations of the phantoms (Michael Covert, Nastasia Green, Tyler Ledon, Rhianna Pfannenstiel, Brian Cronan, and Brian C. Scott) were well done.

The sound balance caused some problems for me, especially near intermission and throughout Act 2, and especially when the singers were clustered in the alcove. The band’s accompaniment overpowered the vocals, often to the extent that I could not hear the singing at all.

Timing and pacing early in the performance were tight and energetic, but Eddie’s “Whatever Happened to Saturday Night” scene felt rushed (unrelated to the microphone problem), the space and dancers a little crowded. Columbia’s “call of the yak” at the end of this scene was very funny and would have been even better if she’d had a chance to do her “solo hysteria” for a bit longer before being zapped. The timing and pacing started to get a little looser in Act 2. By the time Dr. Everitt Scott (Blake R. P. Joseph) is wheeled on stage, things are starting to feel ragged. Joseph gives Scott an accent so thick that what he says is nearly unintelligible, and what little might get through suffers from the same sound imbalance as the singing.

The choreography (by Joshua Buscher and Heather Doris) was great fun and worked well. The players, especially Mendes and Buscher, nailed the right balance of hedonistic body pride. Mendes moved with surprising smoothness and absolute confidence in those incredibly steep shoes, and his swivels and undulations were great. He doesn’t quite reach the incredibly-larger-than-life persona of some who’ve played this role, but he does radiate the necessary sex appeal and moxie.

Marso’s jerky movements preceding “Touch-A Touch-A Touch Me” looked odd and didn’t seem to fit the scene. Her body language is more awkward to begin with (appropriately so), and does smooth out somewhat after this scene (which is also appropriate).

The set design, costumes, and props were effective and appropriate. Black and white film footage projected on a small screen suspended above the Narrator's station worked well to supplement the onstage action. Rocky's black thong was even more outrageous than the shiny gold trunks worn by the character in the movie, and his flaunting, which ranged from shy to coy to ridiculous, was great fun.

One of things I've always wondered about this play is why it has such appeal, which is now multigenerational appeal. After watching tonight's performance, I think part of the answer lies in a kinship to melodrama—audience participation: loud, long, and integral to the success of the production, using known, accepted, and reinforced actions. Instead of booing and hissing a villain, we yell “asshole” every time we hear “Brad.” Instead of cheering the hero, we turn on our cell phones and wave them overhead. We flaunt and celebrate behaviors that we'd normally reject as wicked, but then again, Frank-N-Furter doesn't exactly go home to Transsexual Transylvania at the end. Whatever the reasons, I hope that this joyous bit of irreverent silliness is around for another thirty-five years.

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