

CLEVELAND STAGE ALLIANCE

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Memphis is Serving Up Hot Talent at Cain Park

[Cain Park](#)

Professional Equity House Theatre

Review by: Kevin Kelly

Currently on stage at Cain Park, is the rock-soul infused production of Memphis. A musical by David Bryan (music and lyrics) and Joe DiPietro (lyrics and book). It is loosely based on Memphis disc jockey Dewey Phillips, one of the first white DJs to play black music in the 1950s, and has the distinct notoriety to be the first DJ to play Elvis on the air. This production is led by vivacious Director/Theatre Artistic Director Joanna May Cullinan, who certainly knows how to put together a fabulous cast. The cast list is filled with a lot of *s and ^s, and Christopher Richards* is listed as the Fight Choreographer, which will sell tickets on its own.

Memphis is set in the places where rock and roll was born in the 1950s: the seedy nightclubs, radio stations and recording studios of the musically-rich Tennessee city. It tells the fictional story of DJ Huey Calhoun (Douglas F. Bailey II*), a good ole' local boy with a passion for R&B music and Felicia Farrell (Nicole Sumlin*), an up-and-coming black singer that he meets one fateful night on Beale Street. Despite the objections of their loved ones (Huey's close-minded Mama (Cynthia O'Connell^*) and Felicia's cautious club-owning brother Delray (riveting Anthony Savage-Williams^*), they embark on a dangerous affair. As their careers rise, the relationship is challenged by personal ambition and the pressures of an outside world unable to accept their love.

So let me tell you. In the role of Felicia, Sumlin seems to be experiencing a self-actualization of life, love and the pursuit of equality. I have never heard her sing like this before. It is so powerful, I couldn't find my socks after the show. It is like she found the soul of the music, the soul of the book, and as it still is, the soul of being a black woman in America that deserves to be heard. All three converge into one of the most amazing presentations I have seen in a long time. Each time she enters the stage, her presence fills the theatre. She is a giving actress and perfectly shares the stage and emotional journey with those around her. The voice! Strong, honest, musical, and empowering. I don't know if you can tell, but I really liked it. Bravo.

Starting and riding this wave until the very end is Bailey, as Huey Calhoun. He crafts a very unique character that is quite deceptive. On the outside, still living with mama, he seems kind of like a country bumpkin. But as the story unravels, Bailey slowly shows the strength underneath his veneer in a beautifully crafted character. The bonus to his down-home charm is that he has a big city voice, and uses it to whip up the crowd with his clarion vocals and spectacular range, both emotionally and literally. He is well balanced with Sumlin. Fire and Ice moving together in a love story that melds together in truth.

One fabulous surprise is the performance of Williams as the protective older brother Delray. What a terrific character. He struts into the scene like Frank Sinatra coming on stage, turning to the audience, and saying "Oh, by the way, I own Las Vegas". His vocals were hot, and the relationship he establishes with Sumlin is tight and very believable. Great work. O'Connell is really solid as Mama. A great source of some comedic overbearing, and also, a surprise where she knocks

Mama Rose off the stage and presents her own version of life. Good Stuff. Richards is just the right kind of a pain in the ass. He needs a nightly Senokot martini and the world will be fine. But he ages well on stage and delivers the goods at just the right time to stir up the story. Solid work.

The rest of the cast is fierce and certainly sends some rock and roll fervor into the crowd. They are all in and attack all of their dance numbers and vocals with unbridled energy. Here is the cast serving us LLLLLIIIIIIFFFFFEEEEEE!

Elijah Dawson^
Michael Swain-Smith^
Anna Barrett^
Isaiah Blue^
Kyle Burnett^
Phillip Michael Carroll*
Mario Clopton-Zymler
DeLee Cooper^
Frank Ivancic^
Imani Jackson
Johnathon Jackson
Ian H. Lawrence^
Kate Leigh Michalski^
Dennis Runkle
CorLesia Smith^
William Tipton^
Brooke Turner^
David Turner
Montria Walker^
Darian Wilson^

There are some considerations. One is the speech pattern of Calhoun. There were moments that were dangerously close to a Forest Gump feel. I was praying that there wasn't a character called Jenny in the cast. Also, in places, the dancing was not as sharp as it should have been. People looked unsure at times. Just remember your face can get you through anything. The final end of the show seems very hard to time with the final guitar strums with the cast. It seemed a bit awkward.

Director Cullinan has put together a great show. The cast is on point, and so is the pace. She has definitely found the spirit of the show and based on the heads bopping along, and the silence when shit gets real, she nailed it. Music Director Jordan Cooper assembled a kick-ass band, and deftly assimilated the cast into vocal readiness. Choreographer Leilani Barrett provided era correct movement enhanced the proceedings. Costume Designer Tesia Dugan Benson was on her A-game once again. The outfits were gorgeous, hilarious (Calhoun), and the dresses on Sumlin would sell out on QVC in an hour. WHEW! Set/Projection Designer T. Paul Lowry knocked it out of the "park", (see what I did there). Great use of location, and film to enhance the evening storytelling. Lighting Designer Carlton Guc did a great job of knowing when and where to hit the subtle moments, and when to let it loose on the highlights. Great atmosphere work. Stage Manager extraordinaire Tom Humes* called a great show.

Check out the show! Sumlin alone takes you to church and back again.

*Member Actors' Equity Association

^Equity Membership Candidate

Cleveland Stage Alliance

Ticket Information and Promotional Materials

Thru July 1

Showtimes:
7 pm Thursdays
7 pm Fridays
7 pm Saturdays
2 pm Sundays

Tickets:
\$30-\$32 Reserved Seating

(216) 371-3000
[Order Tickets Online](#)

Location:

Alma Theatre at Cain Park
14591 Superior Road
Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118

