



Oresteia at Almeida Theatre, London



Shaun Williamson and Mica Paris in Love Me Tender at Manchester's Opera House

which Angus Wright administers the drugs that will end Iphigenia's life is particularly chilling. Nor is Icke afraid of silence, of giving his performers breathing space.

He draws from his cast some fine performances. When interviewed by the media, Lia Williams, in the role of Klytemnestra, is contained and composed, but pain and grief churn beneath the surface and it is only a matter of time before they overflow. Wright, with his rich, deep voice, is statesman-like and upright but also capable of conveying great reservoirs of pain. Jessica Brown Findlay – making her stage debut in the role of Electra – is gifted one of the production's quieter speeches but one of its most affecting as she tries to articulate the sting of bereavement, the ache of being unfathered.

Icke dusts his production with horror-film imagery. There are sudden, startling blackouts, a couple of nods to Japanese horror. Briefly we see Electra and Orestes standing twinned in the window like the girls from *The Shining*, which feels entirely apt for this bloody cycle of death and retribution. The death of Agamemnon is particularly brutal and haunting, strains of the Beach Boys' *God Only Knows* playing as Klytemnestra advances on him. It's a stunning sequence.

Elements of Hildegard Bechtler's clean, minimal design, with its translucent screens and digital display, its ticking timer, feel overfamiliar, and the production loses energy and momentum in its final act, the trial sequence. But it is here that it is at its most political – making its case as a play for now and as living, vital theatre – discoursing both on the nature of justice and the nature of stories, our need to keep reworking and retelling them.

★★★★★ *Resonant, thrilling and modern reworking of Aeschylus' trilogy*

## The big regional review

### Manchester

## Love Me Tender

### Theatre

Opera House

June 5-13, then touring until September 26, PN June 8

Author: Joe DiPietro

Director: Karen Bruce

Design: Morgan Large (set), Vicky Gill (costume), James Whiteside (lighting), Richard Brooker (sound)

Musical director: Patrick Hurley

Choreographer: Karen Bruce

Technical: Matt Jones (production manager), Michela Brennan (company manager), Jonathan Gosling (stage manager), James Orange (casting), Caroline Hannam (costume supervisor), Ellie Carroll (head of wardrobe), Claire Auvache (props supervisor)

Cast includes: Mark Anderson, Aretha Ayeh, Chris Howell, Ben Lewis, Felix Mosse, Mica Paris

Producer: Adam Spiegel Productions, Robert G Bartner, Ambassador Theatre Group

Running time: 2hrs 30mins

Reviewer: Roger Foss

Elvis Presley permanently left the building nearly 40 years ago – and there's no sign of his physical resurrection in this jukebox junket, which is chock-full of his familiar – and lesser-known – recorded songs but bears little resemblance to previous Elvis-inclined back-catalogue musicals such as the 1970s Ray Cooney/Jack Good tribute show, or Million Dollar Quartet, featuring a young Presley in his early recording days, or indeed Jailhouse Rock's rehash of the landmark movie.

Thankfully, Elvis impersonators need not apply to appear in this new touring production, which reworks Joe DiPietro's 2005 Broadway musical *All Shook Up*.

Love Me Tender's book goes down the route taken by *Mamma Mia!* and *Jersey Boys*, that of weaving an original story around proven hits. But here the mid-1950s-set narrative also owes a nod to the

cross-dressing mix-ups of *Twelfth Night*, while referencing popular Elvis movies such as the circus-set *Roustabout*, in which the king is transformed from a rock'n'roll danger zone churning out instant classics to a lachrymose celluloid crooner. Elvis diehards will spot long-forgotten rarities such as *I Don't Want to*, lifted from the *Girls! Girls! Girls!* soundtrack.

A lively, cartoonish caper revolves around hip-squiggling, guitar-strumming biker Chad, who turns up to liberate a fun-free midwestern town from decency codes that kill true romance. It's not long before the entire one-horse town has succumbed to the libidinous magic emanating from Chad's blue suede shoes.

Apart from her fizzing choreography and nifty staging, director Karen Bruce's strongest card is to play the whole thing as a tongue-in-cheek spoof mixing Shakespeare's love sonnets with Presley's love songs in an increasingly crazy set-up in which everyone is love-struck, lovelorn or mistakenly in love with somebody else.

Admittedly, its wordiness means it takes too long for the plot mechanics of the ensemble-style piece to get going. A little less conversation and a bit more comedy might not go amiss early on. But refreshingly new musical arrangements work well, the costumes are pure vintage and the barn-like set, though rather samey, suggests small-town America.

Everyone in the cast has their moment, with stand-out performances from Ben Lewis as Chad, looking more like a young Jack Nicholson than an Elvis clone, Mica Paris as the local dive-bar owner and Shaun Williamson as a widower whose world has turned into a heartbreak hotel. But it's the songs that make this show's heart beat, proving that Elvis's music can still be the food of love.

★★★★★ *Musical comedy rises above the average tribute show, mixing Elvis' music with a touch of Shakespeare*

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