

Ride the Cyclone @ Stray Dog Theatre

Music, Lyrics, and Book by Jacob Richmond and Brooke Maxwell
Additional Material by Alan Schmuckler

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This is going to sound weird, but out of all of the productions I had to review for this blog in 2022, Stray Dog Theatre's *Ride the Cyclone* was the one I was looking forward to seeing the most. As a musical theatre fan, I am obsessed with seeking out rarely-produced hidden gems of the musical canon, so when *Ride the Cyclone* was brought to my attention, I was all over it. And so was the rest of the Internet, apparently. When Stray Dog Theatre announced they were producing the show, I discovered that *Ride the Cyclone* had achieved cult classic status with young musical theatre fans – a following rivaled by the likes of *Be More Chill* and *Heathers*. Fans were making song covers, animations, and obsessive deep dives into the text that even made me blush. There was a lot riding on this production for a lot of people, myself included; audiences came from miles around to see this show, leading to yet another totally sold-out run for Stray Dog. And let me tell you, folks, Stray Dog did not disappoint.

Scenic designer Josh Smith wholly transforms the Tower Grove Abbey into the hastily packed, abandoned warehouse of Wonderville, a traveling carnival that was shut down by a horrible tragedy. Some time ago (whether it was several months or several years is never explained), Wonderville made its final stop in a small mining town on dire straits: Uranium City, Saskatchewan, Canada. One day, the carnival's most popular attraction, the Cyclone roller coaster, completely derailed during a ride, resulting in six casualties: one unidentified young woman, and all five members of the St. Cassian High School chamber choir – the pride and joy of Uranium.

This information is told to us by the Amazing Karnak, the carnival's fortune-telling machine gifted with the ability to not only predict the exact circumstances of someone's death but also to change the outcome. Wonderville, however, shut his power away to be a more "family-friendly fun" fortune teller. Karnak tells us that he predicted the choir students would be killed on the roller coaster but could tell them nothing except the phrase "Ride the Cyclone." While shut up in the warehouse, Karnak predicts he is about to be killed by a rat chewing through his power cables. So, wracked with guilt over his inaction, Karnak uses his limited time to summon the spirits of the six souls who perished on the Cyclone. However, Karnak realizes that he can only use the rest of his power to bring one of them back to the world of the living. So, he decides to let everyone tell their life stories, and then put the decision for the winner up to a unanimous vote.

We get to see the stories of Ocean O'Connell Rosenberg, the choir's overachiever who thinks she will be the only one to accomplish anything worthwhile in her new life; Constance Blackwood, Ocean's shy best friend who is hiding some very deep secrets and resentments;

Noel Gruber, the only gay boy in Uranium who is obsessed with living the tragic life of a prostitute from a French New Wave film; Mischa Bachinski, a Ukrainian immigrant who, ironically, moved to Uranium after his mother's death from radiation poisoning, turning to gangsta rap and an online relationship with his fiancée to cope with his isolation; Ricky Potts, a boy born with a degenerative disease who dreams that he is the savior of an alien race of catgirls; and finally the unidentified girl, the Jane Doe, decapitated in the accident and left with no memory of her life, replacing her disembodied head with that of a baby doll prize she found in the warehouse.

Ride the Cyclone is a beast of a show, and it's not even very long – only about an hour and a half. It takes on some pretty heavy themes, with every character exploring what it means to grow up in a dying town, how you find purpose in a life where you have been given nothing but misfortunes, and the wistfulness that comes from wondering what could have been – all issues that are incredibly relevant to today's teens and young adults. But it's not all doom and gloom either; there is a lot of dark humor in this show, mostly from Karnak's witty repartee with the kids. What is really special, however, is the diversity of Jacob Richmond and Brooke Maxwell's score: bubblegum pop, cabaret, rap, prog rock, opera, jazz, and even acoustic love ballads, all of them memorable, identifiable, and cohesive with the show's theming.

The production design, all around, is a visual marvel. I find that Justin Been's biggest strength as a director is his sense of worldbuilding, letting his collaborators simulate a reality that feels truly lived in. With *Ride the Cyclone*, they pulled off some of the most impressive moments of stagecraft I've ever seen. Josh Smith's immersive scenic design, which fully embraces the tacky carnival aesthetic, features several areas on stage that make room for Justin Been's dazzling projections, many of which are the cast's own family photos and home videos that reveal crucial moments in their lives. Been works together with costume designer Eileen Engel, lighting designer Tyler Duenow, sound designer Jacob Baxley, and props designer Gary F. Bell to coordinate all sorts of wondrous stage effects: blending projections in with the cast, covering the entire stage in smoke, altering the cast's voices while they are singing – there was even a song that ended without applause, the stagecraft is that stunning.

The cast consists entirely of accomplished musical theatre performers at the top of their game, giving their roles vivid characterizations courtesy of director Justin Been, ably performing Mike Hodges's precise choreography, and showcasing great singing and musicianship (yes, the cast are multi-instrumentalists to boot) thanks to musical director Leah Schultz. The excellent Stray Dog Players are Eileen Engel as Ocean, Grace Langford as Constance, Mike Hodges as Noel, Riley Dunn as Mischa, Stephen Henley as Ricky, and Dawn Schmid as Jane. The actor playing Karnak is uncredited, only appearing on stage as a life-sized puppet, which gives the character a rather distinctive mysteriousness. The show's four-piece band are all humorously dressed as the rats infesting the warehouse, featuring Leah Schultz on piano, Michaela Kuba on bass and cello, Adam Rugo on guitar, and Joe Winters on percussion.

I say this for a lot of musicals, but *Ride the Cyclone* is a show that is unlike any other. It is an absolute roller coaster of an experience, totally uncompromising in both its intense sadness and

its intense joy. To paraphrase Mischa, this show took all of the pain in our souls and used the passion factory of its heart to transform it into functional joy. There isn't any more to say about *Ride the Cyclone* except that it's thought-provoking, memorable, intensely emotional, and visually stunning. I am so happy that *Ride the Cyclone* has the following that it has, and given the number of people who have traveled across the country just to see this, I firmly believe that Stray Dog's production was certainly worth the trip.