



SISTER ACT: (left to right) Sarah Sokolovic, Emily Walton, & Jamey Hood in *The Shaggs: Philosophy of the World*, about the infamous sibling rockers. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

The Shaggs: Philosophy of the World: Schlock rock's all in the family

THE SHAGGS: PHILOSOPHY OF THE WORLD

Book by Joy Gregory

Music by Gunnar Madsen

Lyrics by Joy Gregory & Gunnar Madsen

Story by Joy Gregory, Gunnar Madsen, & John Langs

Choreography by Ken Roht

Directed by John Langs

Based on the true story of The Shaggs

Through July 3, 2011

Playwrights Horizons Mainstage Theatre

416 West 42nd Street

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By Scott Harrah

There are many elements of classic theater in the riveting, real-life story of The Shaggs, an all-girl, sister-act rock group from the late 1960s: Greek tragedy, opera, and American musical comedy. However, the term “musical comedy” is likely a misnomer as nothing is humorous about the twisted tale of the Wiggin sisters from Fremont, New Hampshire other than their notoriously atonal, homespun attempts at “rock music.” Rolling Stone magazine once described them as “sounding like lobotomized Trapp Family singers,” and a record-studio worker calls the sisters’ work the musical equivalent of “Cubism” in the show itself.

The Shaggs weren’t considered cool until the major media started writing about them in 1980, and by that time, they had experienced more grief and misfortune than most people endure in a lifetime. The late Frank Zappa insisted they were “better than the Beatles.”

That is high praise indeed for three New England girls who didn’t even know how to play or read music when their father, Austin Wiggin (Peter Friedman), bought them instruments, decided to home school them and invest his life savings into turning his talent-free daughters into rock stars, all because he

believed his deceased mother had once predicted greatness for his offspring in a long-ago palm reading.

The Shaggs as a “group” are a mere footnote of glorious kitsch in rock history. However, the real Wiggin sisters were so misguided and emotionally damaged by their authoritative, megalomaniac father that anyone who sees this show will think twice about ever laughing at them or their music again. *The Shaggs: Philosophy of the World* is not just a classic show-biz story gone horribly wrong, but a cautionary tale of how children must deal with parents’ unrealistic expectations.

There is the youngest sister Helen (the remarkable Emily Walton), who is so shy that she’s a borderline deaf-mute, and her older siblings, Dot (Jamey Hood) and Betty (Sarah Sokolovic). As the sisters prepare for Career Day at school, Helen confides in her father that she has not even thought of what she wants to be when she grows up. In the gleeful number “Career Day,” the Wiggin girls and their classmates sing at the school assembly about their elusive dreams, and the song is an infectious reflection of teenage angst in the 1960s. The actresses playing the Wiggin sisters have far better singing voices than the real Shaggs, and they speak in authentic New England accents that make the musical so vividly realistic.

Act one is lush and richly textured with a mixture of Joy Gregory’s fluid narrative about the transformation of the Wiggin sisters into The Shaggs and songs that propel the story forward, such as Dot’s solo number “Don’t Say Nothing Bad About My Dad.” At times, the musical seems as tightly written and as engaging as any stage opus about a parent pushing kids into show business, particularly *Gypsy*. Unfortunately, Mr. Friedman’s Austin Wiggin is hardly as likable a character as Mama Rose.

Without giving too much plot away, there is a point at which the musical should really end in act two: In 1980, when a Boston radio station plays their music, the rock critics shower them with dubious hosannas, and their cult fate is ultimately sealed. However, we are then subjected to pointless biographical detail in a musical that has long since collapsed through its thematic flaws and overwhelmed us with enough dark material.

The cast is consistently compelling even when the story drags. Cory Michael Smith, as Helen’s love interest Kyle, displays a fascinating character arc, going from a geeky teenager to a Vietnam vet. Annie Golden is often heartbreaking as Mrs. Wiggin, and has one of show’s best voices.

Ultimately, the grim outcome of the Wiggins’ ill-fated quest for fame and fortune makes *The Shaggs: Philosophy of the World* intrinsically sad and a tricky subject for a stage epic. Is it possible to truly make a great musical about three sisters who were mostly known for creating bad music? This is an ongoing question in act two as we are bombarded by song after song, regardless of whether it is necessary. The show runs more than two and a half hours long and contains way too much filler.

This could have had a long Off-Broadway run and played to vast audiences. *The Shaggs: Philosophy of the World* as musical theater is sabotaged by its own creators whose egos didn’t allow them to edit their work. It needs a more seasoned director than John Langs; someone with enough vision to pare down the script and keep the dignity and fascination of the Wiggin sisters’ journey intact to make this into the

outstanding musical it could have been.

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