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Hit musical tells the story behind Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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Since its premiere in 2005, the musical "Jersey Boys" has taken the theater world by storm.

It became a smash hit Broadway production, which won five Tony awards, including Best Musical, in 2006. It also was adapted into a major motion picture in 2014, which was directed by legendary actor Clint Eastwood.

Starting Tuesday and running through April 19, the Embassy Theatre will host a touring production of "Jersey Boys" for eight performances full of pop music.

"Jersey Boys" centers on the story of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, one of the biggest pop vocal groups of the 1960s and '70s. The musical features some of their pop classics, such as "Sherry," "Big Girls Don't Cry," "Walk Like a Man," "Dawn (Go Away)," "Rag Doll," "Can't Take My Eyes Off You," "Workin' My Way Back to You," "Who Loves You" and "December 1963 (Oh, What a Night)," among many others.

The story of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons begins in New Jersey, where they're from — hence the musical's title. It's a working-class, rags-to-riches tale that includes heartache, romance, music, the wrong side of the tracks, Italian-Americans, success, disappointment and connections with the Mafia.



More Information

Amazing story

WHAT: The touring production of the hit Broadway musical "Jersey Boys" plays in Fort Wayne.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through April 19, and matinees at 2 p.m. April 18-19

WHERE: Embassy Theatre, 121 W. Jefferson Blvd.

COST: \$20-\$95. Tickets are available at the Embassy box office 10 a.m.-6 p.m. weekdays and before shows, at Ticketmaster outlets, www.ticketmaster.com and 1-800-745-3000. For information, call the Embassy box office at 424-5665 or go to www.fwembassytheatre.org.



The News-Sentinel
A conversation With Rick Elice of Jersey Boys

SOUNDCLOUD



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Rick Elice, the play's co-author, says he wanted to write "Jersey Boys" with his partner Marshall Brickman from the moment he first heard Frankie Valli and Bob Gaudio (writer and singer of the Four Seasons) pitch their story to him.

"Marshall Brickman, my writing partner and I, were sitting in the back of an Italian restaurant on West 46th Street in New York, listening to Frankie Valli and Bob Gaudio talking about what their lives were like growing up in New Jersey being first-generation, blue-collar, Roman Catholic, Italian-American, you know, trapped guys in a social setup that they really wanted to get out of as much as they enjoyed being part of," Elice said in a telephone interview.

"We responded the way anybody responds listening to a good story," Elice said, "whether you're a kid being told a bedtime story or whether you're in the theater ... hearing something that's really interesting, kind of amusing in places, heartbreaking in places, bizarre in places, (and) utterly compelling in all cases.

"We looked at each other, Marshall and I," Elice continued, "and thought, 'Wow, you know, this is certainly the stuff of theater,' because it was kind of the stuff of all great drama.

"There's revenge and friendship and women and success and failure and the pressure to repeat success," he said. "And there's backbiting and backstabbing, ... by the time the pasta arrived, we were anxious to write it."

Even though "Jersey Boys" has spawned a best-selling Broadway cast CD and has been running for more than 10 years on Broadway, with touring companies in the United States

and United Kingdom as well as shows in Las Vegas and London, the appeal of the Four Seasons' music and story seems everlasting.

Elice says that, while the music brings people to the show, it's the compelling story that keeps them coming back and wanting to see more.

"The characters are really interesting, and you care about them," Elice said. "But mostly it adds something to the music to understand what these guys were going through when they were making those records.

"We know what we were going through when we were listening to them, but now, for the first time, we know what they were going through when they were making them," he added.

While young audience members may not know the music of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, "Jersey Boys" is a terrific way to introduce them to some classic pop music.

Hayden Milanes, who plays Valli in this touring production, said in a phone interview that the play also served as his introduction to the Four Seasons' music.

"I wasn't a fan of the music, per say, nor was I educated with this realm of music until this show," Milanes said. "This show kind of lends itself to be a good history lesson and a music lesson.

"This show kind of allowed me an excuse to get to know Frankie and the Four Seasons."

"It's a challenge every night," Milanes added. "It's a great show about family, friendship and music."

While Elice said he was certainly familiar with the Four Seasons' music before he began working on the play, one thing he had no idea about was the Four Seasons' connection to the mafia.

Coming from a more privileged background, Elice was surprised by the obstacles Valli and the Four Seasons had to overcome just to survive, let alone be successful.

"Certainly it was their connection with the mob," Elice said of the most surprising part of working on the Four Seasons' story.

"Hearing their connection to the mob and how it was a daily influence in their lives, how they had to navigate every day those shark-infested waters in order to survive as artists and, in fact, survive as living people was a real eye-opener to me."

While Elice is thrilled by the success of "Jersey Boys," one of the best things about the project for him was being able to create a family with the people who were involved in making the play.

"It's kind of like what the show is about," he said. "You've got these four guys who are a band of brothers, and they have their issues with each other and they get angry with each other and they love each other, but the bond between them is like iron.

"And in making the show 'Jersey Boys,' I developed the same kind of relationship with another band of brothers, the men and women who put this show together," Elice said.

"It's been the most satisfying professional experience of my life."