

TWV musical 'Rocket Boys' tells story as old as time

POINT BLANK



**John
Blankenship**

“A rocket won’t fly unless somebody lights the fuse.” That line pretty much symbolizes the mindset of a group of 1950s teenagers in one of the nation’s most promising musicals.

The story of the “Rocket Boys” likely will live on in the hearts and minds of Americans for as long as there are people on the planet. And the Cliffside Amphitheatre, under a summer moon and canopy of stars, is the perfect setting for the animated musical currently being performed by Theatre West Virginia. Homer Hickam himself co-penned the script, and the score is by the composing team of Dan Tramon and Diana Belkowski.

It’s a story as old as time—one young person has a dream but he must fight the odds and persevere in order to be able to soar, to literally take flight, and finally succeed. But this is the true story of West Virginia native Homer (“Sonny”) Hickam, Jr., and how he went from a boy who launched improvised rockets in the grey and cloudy skies of McDowell County to a man who reached for the stars as a NASA engineer.

Hickam turned his life story into the best-selling book “Rocket Boys,” which in turn became the acclaimed Universal motion picture “October Sky.” Last summer, another dream took flight as TWV hosted the world premier of a new interpretation of the story, “Rocket Boys the Musical.” The show returned earlier this week as part of the 2012 outdoor theatre season.

Fans of the original memoir will likely notice that the stage production follows Hickam’s story very closely, with some of the dialogue -- and even Tramon & Belkowski’s song lyrics -- coming directly from the author’s words. Many times the musical’s leading character Sonny (played by Carl Anthony Tramon, co-author and associate director of the musical) breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly. And while the story may be a familiar one from the book and the film, this year’s TWV production is fresh, with the addition of some new songs and/or lyrics to the show’s already acclaimed score.

Set in 1957 in Coalwood WV, a coal mining and football-loving community, costumes are simple: bobby sox, poodle skirts, cheerleader uniforms, lettermen’s jackets, and mining hats. The sets are aesthetically pleasing, including the mine tippie, always looming in the background of the lives of those in Coalwood, against the starry sky, almost a character itself.

The Equity Guest-Artist production, which includes a cast of TWV company performers who auditioned for specific roles, is one of the finest ever mounted on the Grandview stage in its 52-year history. Carl Anthony Tramon as “Sonny” is the standout in the cast, and the best single thing I have ever seen on the TWV stage. In nearly every scene, he perfectly conveys Sonny’s teenage angst, a combination of yearnings -- for a career goal thought unattainable by most, for a girl also thought unattainable, and for the slightest hint of affirmation from his father. Nikki Yarnell gives a strong performance as well, portraying Elsie as a woman devoted to her family, yet yearning for a life far away from the coalfields. She has no trouble standing up to her husband, adeptly reminding him more than once that he has *two* sons.

And then there are the “Rocket Boys”— Ryan McAtee as O’Dell Carroll, the Boy Scout wannabe, sheepishly ripping off his homemade merit badges when he has broken an edict of Scouting; Greg Smith as Roy Lee Cooke, the “Coalwood Love Master,” who has little patience with his friends when they get off track and is always on the lookout for a new way to impress the girls; and Alec Kelsey as Quentin Wilson, the brains of the group, could have added “Velcro” and “pantyhose” to our vocabularies, if Roy Lee had just let him finish a sentence. These young actors light up the stage in their scenes, and when Smith runs into the crowd during his “Fair Shake” number, his dream of being Elvis comes beautifully to life.

Other standouts include Chris Bellinger as the stern father, at home in the mine, but not in his own home; and Allie Patton, who portrays Sonny’s dream girl Dorothy Plunk, with just the right mix of spunk and sincerity. She is much like Elsie—a woman trying to break free of the role she has been given in Coalwood. Shelly O’Rourke (“Valentine”), Rocky Cooper (“Ike Bykovski”), and Carrie Royce Fisk (“Miss Frieda Riley”) also make lasting impressions in their roles.

It would hard to pick a favorite among the musical numbers. The buoyant “Build A Rocket” is a perfect 50’s pop number, while the layers of building choruses make “Where A Man Should Be” a powerful climax to the first act. “Rise” is a majestic closing anthem, but my own favorite is the opener, “Coalwood,” which sets the scene for the entire show.

“Light a fuse” under yourself and go see this spectacular addition to the Theatre West Virginia schedule. It’s a story that makes all West Virginians proud, and the musical is sure to inspire kids everywhere as well as exhilarating even the hardest of adult hearts. This production is the perfect extension of Hickam’s work. It will continue at TWV through Aug.16. Don’t miss it!

— *Blankenship is a columnist
for The Register-Herald.*
E-mail: jabbb@suddenlink.net