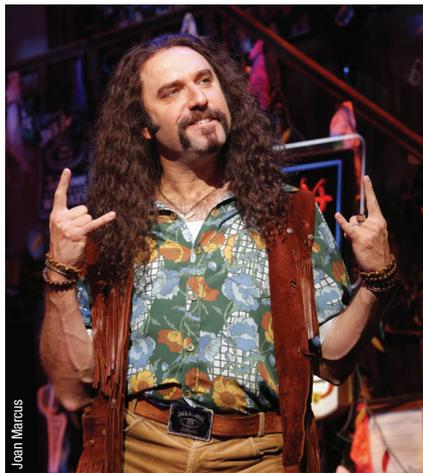


Rock of Ages Delivers the '80s "Any Way You Want It"

BY MELANIE BAKER

People, start your cassette players: it's party time on Broadway! Get ready to get down to the acid-washed sounds of the 1980s with a wine cooler in one hand while pumping the other—curled into a concert fist—the air as you chant along to Bon Jovi, Whitesnake, and Journey.



Jean Marcus

Adam Dannheisser as club owner Dennis in *Rock of Ages*

Directed by Kristin Hanggi, with retro-centric choreography by Kelly Devine, *Rock of Ages*—or *RoA*, as its dubbed by its Gen-X cult fans—plays heavily into '80s stereotypes (imagine a John Hughes marathon with a little more leather, and ten times the spunk). Still, don't make the mistake of assuming *RoA* attendees simply make up a massive karaoke phalanx, replete with drinks couriered by young servers in T-shirts and jeans.

While the soundtrack is hands down the most epic draw, there's much to be said for the musical's book, which follows the haphazard love story of aspiring rocker Drew, aka Wolfgang Von Colt, played by Justin Matthew Sargent (coming off a

brief stint in *Bonnie and Clyde*), and doe-eyed Midwest transplant Sherrie (*Grease* vet Ashley Spencer)—cue the Steve Perry track, please—as they meet on a fateful night in LA at the notorious dive, The Bourbon Room.

But all's not totally righteous and tubular on the Sunset Strip. The Bourbon Room, owned by longtime rock scenester Dennis, is facing the strong arm of gentrification via scene-stealing performances by German father-son team Hertz and Franz, played by Paul Schoeffler and Cody Scott Lancaster, respectively. As a result, it's up to granola queen Regina (Josephine Rose Roberts) to take to the streets with protest posters and a fierce message a la "We're Not Gonna Take It."

Meanwhile, back at the Bourbon Room, bodacious babes swoon left and right to the tumultuous vocals of bad-boy rock demigod Stacey Jaxx (a heavily eyelined Jeremy Woodard), while Drew and Sherrie come to grips with the struggles of making it in the big city. Through it all, Dennis (Adam Dannheisser, who originated the role both off- and on Broadway) bears witness to the unfolding melodrama alongside emcee/sidekick Lonny (Genson Blimline, gleefully playing off the raunchiest facets of his stage persona).

Speaking to the evolution of Dennis—a character he's been immersed in since 2009—Dannheisser notes, "He's definitely evolved in terms of my familiarity and

Imagine a John Hughes film marathon with a little more leather, and ten times the spunk.

how to finesse the role. I've learned to find more nuances from playing the part eight times a week." He adds that his wig and costume (very hippie-stoner) were critical contributions: "I knew who this guy was."

Although his role seems to fit as seamlessly as the weathered leather vest he dons each night, rock musicals were far from the actor's mind and agenda. "I did musicals as an undergraduate, but when I went to NYU for graduate school I did more straight theater," Dannheisser says. Which explains why, when the audition for *RoA* came up, he found himself more attracted to the acting aspect of Dennis, with the musical appeal coming later. "I realized, I can sing like this guy. He's got that smoky, grainy quality."

Fighting the temptation to issue a spoiler alert, let's just say that it's in the second

act that Dennis gets to break loose vocally with REO Speedwagon's 1984 chart topper "I Can't Fight This Feeling" with an unlikely cast mate. It's a scene Dannheisser loves—one that has him descending the set's large staircase into the hook of the song. "I've improvised a lot with that moment," he says, describing the number's climactic twist as "magical." And clearly audiences agree, considering this is one of the show's primo comic high points.

Still, Dannheisser is aware that *RoA* audiences may come into the theater underestimating the production's overall fun—and clout. By the time they exit, however, they know: *Rock of Ages* is the whole package. "A perfect storm, with the music, '80s romance, and really great comedy," he concludes. In short, the ultimate—the gnarliest—rock musical.

Rock of Ages is playing at the Helen Hayes Theatre, 240 W. 44th St. For tickets, call 212-239-6200 or visit rockofagesmusical.com.

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