

Rock and Roll Rages in *Fire*

Fire
Maclab Theatre
til March 1
review by Roberta Franchuk

"Talent is a gift from God."
 "Rock and roll is the Devil's music."
 So what happens when a God-given talent is used to glorify an invention of the Devil? *Fire*, playing at the Maclab Theatre, explores this question through the lives of two brothers, Cale and Herchel Blackwell. Raised in Razorback, Arkansas by a fire-breathing preacher, the brothers' gifts and inclinations lie in different directions, as do their destinies.

Cale begins playing piano in church, angering his father and shocking the congregation when he adds boogie piano riffs to staid old hymns. Deciding he has to "look eternity in the face", he forsakes bible college for the bars of Memphis, playing sizzling piano to shrieking fans.
 Herchel graduates at the top of his class in broadcast preaching and returns to Razorback determined to bring the marvels of the electronic age to his church.
 As their fortunes rise, the brothers grow further and further from their original purpose. Cale loses his child-bride Molly and sinks into bourbon-soaked anonymity. Her-

chel expands his radio show to television and his television show to satellite coverage, but his ministry gradually becomes the voice of a high-pressure "fear of God" politician who uses the church's mailing list to send ugly propaganda. The gulf between the two grows ever wider, yet they are still similar enough that their final confrontation crackles with tension.
 The exploration of the characters of the brothers is fascinating but handled rather awkwardly. The first half of the play belongs to Cale (Ted Dykstra), who plays rock and roll with the sensuality of the young Elvis Presley and the energy of the young Jerry Lee Lewis.

The rock numbers are performed under pulsing red light, overlaid by wailing saxophone, the rest of the band only semi-visible and more than slightly sinister. Cale's rise and fall is covered with only a few references to his brother's fortunes.
 The second half is the story of Herchel (Ron Lea), as his success blinds him to the distance he has strayed from his roots and his family. When the brothers are reunited for their attempted reconciliation, much of the tension has been lost because of the lack of effective intertwining of the two stories. The second half is also rather slow in comparison to the frantic energy of the first. The final message of hope, delivered in counterpoint to a sickening "God and Country" election speech, seems out of place and unnecessary.

The performances range from very good to rivetting. Dykstra is marvellous in all incarnations — rebellious teenager, rock star to excess, and finally tormented soul needing forgiveness. Lea gives depth to Herchel, a character that could all too easily become cardboard. Janet Land as Molly, the woman both men love, is highly credible as she ages from a 13 year old girl to a woman who tries to reconcile the loves of her life.

Supporting players are very good. Peter Millard and John Wright not only carry multiple roles but act as bassist and guitar player in the band. This is obviously a very talented cast.

Original use of the entire theatre occurs throughout the play. Audience participation includes the passing of real collection plates (netting the cast about \$20 in loose change). Special mention should go to Judy-Lynn Sawchuk and Charlene Sashuk, who not only represented the congregation of the church, the hysterical female fans, bored prostitutes and teenyboppers, but spent their spare time moving pianos and carrying props.

The weaknesses of this play are balanced by the strengths of the players. The music sizzles, but the story tends to sputter. A valiant effort, all the same.

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