

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

CURRENT THEATRE REVIEWS by Travis Michael Holder

JULIUS WEEZER



Photo by Ed Krieger

El Portal Theatre

Since its inception in 1995, the Troubadour Theater Company's "ringmaster" and resident comic genius Matt Walker has adapted and directed over 40 original mostly holiday-themed productions, one more riotous, more raucous, more

delightfully ridiculous than the next.

With each piece revolving around the songbook of one well-beloved international popstar, former productions have included *It's a Stevie Wonderful Life*, *Little Drummer Bowie*, *A Christmas Carole King*, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Rein-Doors*, and *Frosty and Snow-Manilow*. Just the titles alone should give you a clue of what the Troubies are all about even if you're not already as much of a confirmed diehard fan as I am. See, not a December has gone by when I was stuck here in the decidedly non-festive El Lay that whatever these guys presented that year was not a part of my furtive attempt to conjure some sundrenched seasonal cheer.

Walker and his adoring, KoolAid-engorged disciples knocked their performances out onto Riverside Drive year after year, selling out every show until the company finally outgrew the 130-seat former Falcon Theatre in 2016, the longtime home where their late-great supreme mentor Garry Marshall gave them free reign to be as outrageous and goofy as they wanted to be.

Now housed for the last two seasons on the 360-seat Debbie Reynolds Stage at the historic (and appropriately, former vaudeville house) the El Portal, where both *How the Princh Stole Christmas* and *A Year Without a Santana Claus* were also sellouts even in the larger space, soon the Troubies will have to bump whatever *Nutcracker* has been booked into the Dorothy Chandler to accommodate all the worshipful fans who want to sample their unique and unstoppably silly holiday wares.

Although non-seasonal presentations from the Troubies have been mounted prior to this, their new world premiere presentation *Julius Weezer*, melding ol' Will Shakespeare with the work of the enduring funk-rock iconic band Weezer, is an all-new event for me personally. Leaving my holiday finery and ugly Christmas sweaters packed in cedar chips under my bed for another 7 months or so, I was curious to see what these unfiltered zanies would come up with leaving their own giant snowman costumes and colorful balls—no pun intended—in storage as they prepared to open the troupe's 25th anniversary season.

Julius Weezer does not disappoint. Rome circa 44 B.C. has never been this radiantly-adorned, especially on Christopher Scott Murillo's versatile two-level set that features Derick Finely's live five-piece band peeking out from behind the action, while Halei Parker's colorful tunics and plastic CVS armor prompted one of that notorious emperor's assassins Metellus (stalwart Troubie veteran and the show's co-producer Beth Kennedy, who also plays Calpurnia in a dead-on Cher) to quip: "We murdered Julius Caesar and spent a lot of money at Joann's Fabrics."

Such asides are peppered throughout all Troubie shows, but there's something even funnier when they are interspersed with the familiar classic speeches created by the Bard himself, such as Cinna (heralding the welcome return of way too-long absent company member Morgan Rusler) commenting as he tries to escape that he hears Pacoima is a sanctuary city or the injured Decius (local treasure Rick Batalla) taking himself to Kaiser Temporary for treatment since it'll be years before it will be called Kaiser Permanente.

As always, the ensemble could not be better, from Walker himself as Cassius and *Jersey Boys'* veteran Frankie Valli, Joseph Leo Bwarie, as a fan-dancing Octavius Caesar—neither immune to roasting as they're described, respectively, as looking like Schneider from *One Day at a Time* and a Sephora makeup-wearing Burt Reynolds touring in *The Mikado*.

The production is greatly enriched by the appearance of LA's resident intimate theatre god Rob Nagle as a Brutus who, in his too-short toga and Prince Valiant wig, might just be the long-sought secret lovechild of Moe and Curly of The Three Stooges. He is well complemented by Victoria Hoffman making an auspicious Troubie debut as his faithful wife Portia, offering a song that might surprise anyone who has never heard her sing (something to which I was privy back a few thousand years ago when she was one of the White Wash chorines backing my warbling Chicago gangster Givola in Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* at Classic Theatre Lab).

Batalla is especially notable doubling as Decius and as Brutus' limp-wristed servant Lucius—which he insists must be pronounced “Luscious”—morphing between characters so fast that he tells us he must look down at his shoes to know which character voice to use. As Marc Antony, the crew-cutted Matt Merchant takes the role a bit too seriously, missing some juicy opportunities to have fun sending up the traditionally heroic role, but while his acting is, intentionally or not, reminiscent of David Hasslehoff without the red speedos, his singing is much, much better.

Each member of the committed supporting cast provides eager and worthy Troubially, including Cloie Wyatt Taylor as Cleopatra; Mike Sulprizio (surprised onstage in the middle of his death scene to honor his 50th birthday) as Casca; Suzanne Jolie Narbonne as various servant girls and cupbearers; and an ever-exasperated David C. Wright as Trebonius, a character with a name so difficult to remember his reaction becomes a running gag.

Still, it's quite a treat to see veteran actor Andy Robinson, with his 50-plus-year career including mostly dramatic roles—or, as he proclaims in his program bio, “all varieties of saints and sinners classic and modern”—in the title role. He obviously has a swell time hamming it up, which he does in such a spritely and energetic fashion that it's quite impressive to behold, especially for one of the few people left standing who is even more long-in-tooth than I am.

When first warned by the Soothsayer (a wonderfully deadpanned Rusler) to beware the Ides of March, Robinson's Caesar proclaims he is unfazed. “Naw, I'm old,” he poo-pooes, “I've seen some shit,” a line with which I can definitely relate.

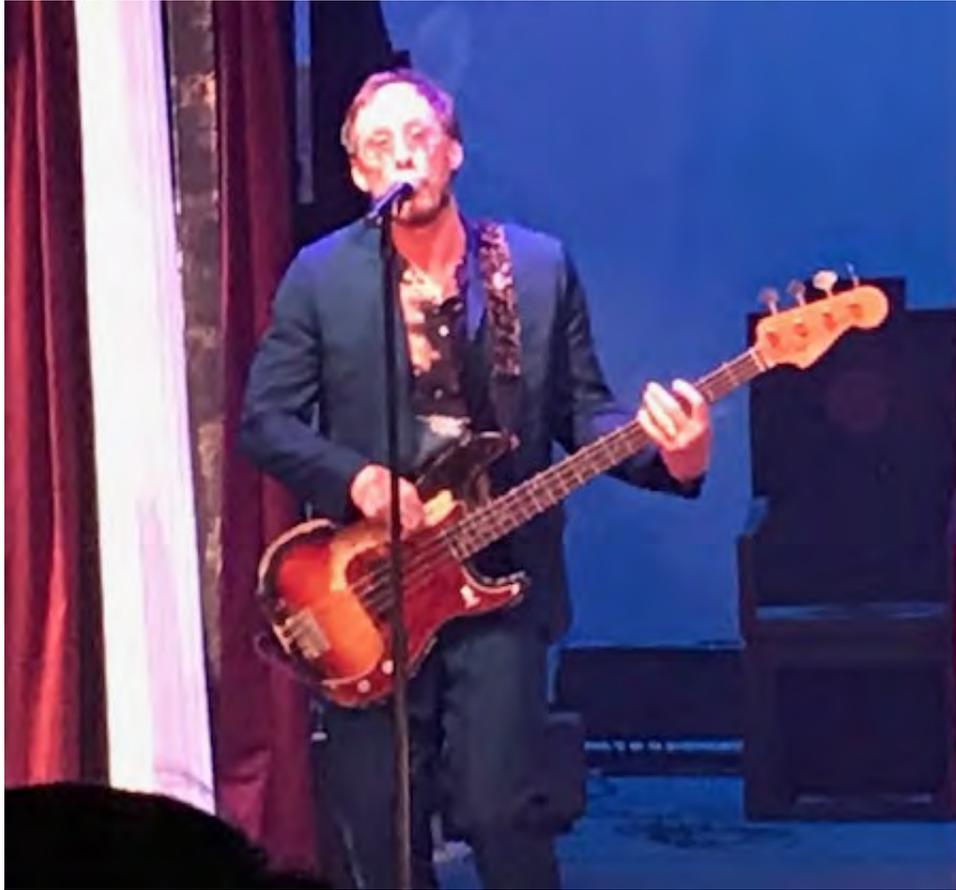
When Caesar's famous demise is depicted—cleverly, of course, again with a nod to costumer Parker's ingenuity—at the end of Act One, it's rather disappointing to wonder if Robinson's time onstage has ended until he returns frequently as an unsettled spirit, prompting various castmembers the opportunity to intone, “Great Caesar's Ghost!” on a regular basis and the actor himself to joke about retuning to the Green Room for another rest between his spectral homages to Shakespearean apparitions.

I have to admit, as much as I enjoyed and highly recommend *Julius Weezer*, I did miss the Troubie's gigantic Christmas tree headdresses and candy cane-adorned set pieces that gave the company permission to pull out every stop, particularly since the show's frequent mention of its two-hour, two-act length (“This is a sleepy time,” one character prophetically notes) accurately reflected my own thoughts.

It was amazing to hear some of the original play's more infamous 420-year-old speeches, especially when delivered by actors such as Nagle, who is uncannily able to switch between comedic and dramatic delivery on a dime, but I do think things could be tightened considerably. This includes the music of Weezer which, although uniformly excellent, does have a tendency to be a tad slow in the tempo department, leaving the ensemble to stand around looking for something to do as others sing the band's most popular ballads.

Speaking of nostalgia, when Walker announced at curtain call that the audience should stay seated for a special guest performance, I was hoping it would be Kennedy making her umpteenth cameo appearance as the stilt-walking, Streisand-nailed Snowy the Winter Warlock peeking through the curtain intoning her familiar “Hellllloooo!” It's a role Kennedy has played so many times in Troubadour shows past that she admits she finds herself talking in her character voice in her daily life and it seems Snowy should be part of any rule-defying Troubie presentation at this point regardless of season or setting.

However, the actual special guest performance did make up somewhat for the lack of our Snowy, since the curtain opened to reveal Weezer's legendary bass guitarist Scott Shriner, who treated the grateful opening night audience with an impromptu min-concert that was in itself worth the price of admission.



Still, even without an authentic original bandmember willing to overlook that fact that the Troubadours have lifted their material and created new lyrics without permission (prompting Walker to quip he was glad Shiner wasn't there to slap them with a Cease and Desist notice), *Julius Weezer* is a joy.

As *Beach Blanket Babylon* became the voice of a signature homegrown humor in San Francisco for the last 45 years, the Troubadour Theater Company needs more than holiday specials and short spring runs in Los Angeles. These inventive folks need their own friggin' theatre if you ask me.

THROUGH MAY 19: El Portal Theatre, 11206 Weddington St. at Lankershim, NoHo. 818.508.4200 or www.elportaltheatre.com