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WE WILL ROCK YOU. Book by Ben Elton. Music and lyrics by Queen (Freddie Mercury, Brian May, Roger Taylor, John Deacon) and Ben Elton. Regent Theatre, Melbourne. 16 August 2003.

The epic quality of classic Queen songs like “Bohemian Rhapsody” and “Radio Ga Ga” has been exploited theatrically for the musical, *We Will Rock You*. The musical premiered in the West End production (2002) and has been adapted for the Regent Theatre in Melbourne largely intact, with a new cast and local, not British, pop culture references inserted.

The plot is an unabashed, tongue-in-cheek amalgamation of pop culture and legends, including Excalibur, incorporating over twenty of Queen’s most popular songs. It is several centuries into the future. A hippie (Robert Grubb) recounts the homogenization of popular music, beginning around the time of *Australian Idol* (broadcast on channel ten at the time of performance). Now the world is dominated by Globalsoft.com, which controls the output of music, banning musical instruments and producing a stream of manufactured boy, girl, and boy and girl bands. Globalsoft.com’s CEO is leather-clad Killer Queen (Annie Crummer), surrounded

by an ensemble of executives in matching suits, quiffs, and at times bright pink cleaning appliances. She dictates what every youth wears, listens to, how they speak, and what they think. From this banal, cyber-inspired public emerge Galileo (Michael Falzon) and Scaramouche (Kate Hoolihan).

Galileo is a James Dean-like teen in blue jeans and black leather jacket. He is the chosen one who knows lyrics from the lost songs of the latter twentieth century, fragments he cannot rationalize. With the malcontent, Scaramouche, he breaks free from virtual teen reality to join the Bohemians, punk/hippie youths whose clothing cites pop trends of the 1970s and 80s. As this is the period that marked Queen’s success, the citation acts less to construct the Bohemians as rebels, for they are, in their own way, as conformist as the “ga-ga kids” in their white mini-skirts and pants, as to recall pop’s earlier, insurgent fashions. The Bohemians name themselves from old posters of rock legends whose music is forgotten. In fact, the names are humorous: less legends of rock than proof of pop music’s vagaries, the ensemble including Bob the Builder (Adam Lubicz), Charlotte Church (Tracy Wilson-Stewart), Cliff Richard (Matt Lee), and Britney Spears (Jason Chong), the last a muscular, Asian man in a kilt. After battling the minions of virtual



Melbourne cast of *We Will Rock You* featuring Kate Hoolihan (Scaramouche) and Michael Falzon (Galileo). Photo: Serge Thomann.

reality, Galileo and Scaramouche uncover a guitar buried by Queen back in the twentieth century and live rock and roll is returned to society.

The most poignant number is "No-one But You (Only the Good Die Young)." Comedy is momentarily checked as Oz (Amanda Harrison) leads the Bohemians in song. The one post-Queen song included, it was originally written by Brian May as a tribute prompted by the deaths of the Princess of Wales and Queen's lead singer, Freddie Mercury. In the musical, it is a eulogy to the loss of many of rock's pivotal artists, with the unelaborated Freddie honoring Mercury. Mercury, who is distantly echoed in Galileo, died in 1991, and instead of an overture, *We Will Rock You* begins with Mercury's own recording of "Innuendo," suggestively imprinting the performance with the genuine, versus manufactured or emulated, rock artist.

Queen's music epitomizes epic rhythms and eccentricity. Their songs are performed indiscriminately both by Galileo and Scaramouche and by Killer Queen and her henchman, Kashoggi (Ross Girven). The narrative plays fast and loose with the ideological ramifications, reflecting the authorship of Ben Elton, whose career has spanned the cult series *Blackadder*, plays including *Popcorn* (1996), and books including *Dead Famous* (2001), and whose work reflects and dissects the often comic synthesis of global pop culture. The book of *We Will Rock You* confronts and asserts homogeneity. If Queen's songs represent premanufactured rock, nevertheless with little rewriting Killer Queen can use "A Kind of Magic" to explain the alchemy of virtual marketing and impressionable teens as readily as Galileo and Scaramouche express their angst with the song "Under Pressure." Queen's music shifts between ideological poles, ironically permitting figures of global homogeneity to speak through genuine rock, and the lyrics are interspersed in dialogue as both direct and ostensibly unconscious quotes that play off the relation between the recognizable source and new epic context.

The ideological jangle of these lyric fragments are finally synthesized by Galileo into a hopeful, if ephemeral, expression of human spirit. As he strings together the words of "We Will Rock You," the guitar hidden in the "place of champions"—Wembley Stadium, where Queen performed in the 1980s—is revealed, Scaramouche plays it, and the show's live band is itself brought forth on stage. The band's appearance and Wembley's significance demonstrate the plot's disclosure: the legacy of Queen's music in an industry increasingly dominated by corporatization and marketing. Under the veneer of topical patter about the condition of the

contemporary music industry, *We Will Rock You* communicates the often haphazard collection of meanings that characterize popular music, slipping between the nonsensical, the sentimental, and the political to ultimately, simply celebrate the success of Queen's music.

We Will Rock You is more about the music than the frequently one-dimensional characters (nonetheless played by the cast with gusto) and the predictable set, which borrows appropriately the staging of rock concerts with lasers and big screens. Although the actors cannot affect the unique sound of Mercury's voice, when they launch into a song, audience response is moderated through familiarity with Queen's original and recorded performances. The musical's narrative actually works through this connection, spinning the songs into the loose mythology based on Queen's cultural iconology. Waving their arms, clapping, whistling, the audience, as diverse as any theatrical production could wish for and reflecting Queen's own fan base, is *We Will Rock You's* object. Galileo and Scaramouche lead the way in an exuberant, often silly, epic celebration of Queen's legacy addressed to its fans.

REBECCA-ANNE C. DO ROZARIO

Melbourne

BEAUTY. By Tina Landau. La Jolla Playhouse, Mandell Weiss Forum, La Jolla, California. 19 October 2003.

In the fall production of *Beauty* at the La Jolla Playhouse, Tina Landau retells the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*. The play's time is "A thousand years ago and the present" and the place is "Nearby and far away." Landau's play with music moves rapidly forward and back in time, gathering steam, momentum, and questions until the prince and princess lean in for the kiss. The fairy tale, though fractured, remains intact.

Landau's updating is in the details. This princess does not want to be called princess and she stomps on tables with men in pubs; this prince studies philosophy and cannot sleep without Ambien. This sleeping beauty must learn to learn as she goes backward in time searching for why she is asleep. This prince must push through the briar bushes, learning to unlearn the cynicism found in his Wittgenstein and Nietzsche to surrender to the beauty he finds asleep.