# 'Rocky Horror' a wild pleasure

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**THEATER REVIEW**

The gender-bending "Rocky Horror Show" has returned to Warehouse Theatre and, as advertised, it's bigger and bawdier than before.

Director Brian Haimbach's edgy stage production, a reprise of the 2010 sold-out run of the show at the Warehouse, is deliciously decadent — a campy, irreverent, over-the-top rock 'n' roll burlesque show.

It's a riotous bacchanal.

With its ample opportunities for audience participation, "Rocky Horror" also is a huge crowd-pleaser. But be forewarned: It's certainly not for all theater-goers. Strong language and vivid sexual situations abound.

The plot, familiar to fans of the 1975 film "Rocky Horror Picture Show," is rather slim but it hardly matters. It's Richard O'Brien's sassy and hard-charging rock music that propels the show exuberantly forward.

The musical follows two young innocents, Brad (Kenneth Brady Smith) and Janet (Chelsea Ann Atkins), who get stranded when their car breaks down. They stumble upon the home of the transvestite Frank-N-Furter and his bizarre entourage.

A night of music and mayhem ensues, centering on the creation of a Frankenstein's monster-like man named Rocky.

The show is both subversive and, at times, surprisingly traditional in moral outlook. It revels in excess, celebrating self-expression and self-actualization even though, as in an old Greek tragedy, hubris ultimately gets its just desserts.

Such deeper meanings are probably barely detectible in the overall party atmosphere of the show.

Haimbach, the director, embraces the show's inherent flamboyance and naughtiness and takes it to the next level — or perhaps further. In Haimbach's capable hands, this "Rocky Horror" is a wild and joyous ride.

Will Ragland once again commands the stage as the androgynous Frank-N-Furter, a ghoulish Norma Desmond. It's a superb tour de force performance by Ragland, a veteran local actor and Greenville County's Teacher of the Year. On Thursday's opening night, I particularly enjoyed Ragland's occasional forays into a suave Southern dialect.

The versatile Matthew Merritt is a treat as the major-domo Riff-Raff, nimbly slithering about the stage with a salacious grin. Merritt has one of the best improvised asides of the night, a well-aimed jab at Chick-fil-A.

Angela Price returns also as the semi-crazed Magenta. Price relishes every scenery-chewing moment.

Kenneth Brady Smith and Chelsea Ann Atkins are terrific as Brad and Janet, refugees from the '50s. The sparkling Atkins unleashes a powerful voice in her soaring solos.

April Schaeffer dazzles as the lissome Columbia. Schaeffer also choreographed the sexy, energetic dances.

Graham Zielinski makes an appealing Rocky, endowing an eye-candy role with emotion and sympathy.

Aaron Pennington does a nice turn as the bumptious Eddie.

Reed Halvorson is a bundle of uptight outrage as the crypto-Nazi Dr. Scott. Michael Hart plays the Narrator with appropriate tongue-in-cheek solemnity.

The three backup singers (Cindy Mixon, Jonathan Kilpatrick and Chelsea Rudisill) and the small chorus of singers/dancers are top-notch.

What can one say about musical director Joe Wehunt? Anytime he's leading the band, a first-rate experience is guaranteed.

Elizabeth Floto-Flagg's costumes are creative and colorful — seemingly inspired, in equal parts, by sci-fi films, glam rock and drag shows.

Shannon Robert created the dark, industrial set and Tony Penna provides the evocative lighting.

Not surprisingly, tickets are going fast for this "Rocky Horror Show" revival, which runs through Sept. 29. Call 235-6948.

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