

Show Guide

Off-Off Broadway *October 05, 2005*

The Shaggs: Philosophy of the World

Reviewed By Robert Windeler

This is a very good musical about some very bad musicians, a crowd pleaser of a show about some of life's most pathetic losers. That paradoxical feat would have been very hard to achieve without a first-rate, eclectic score (music by Gunnar Madsen, lyrics by Joy Gregory and Madsen), a splendid libretto (Gregory) based on a true story, and eight uniformly excellent and committed actors who play their roles as convincingly as if they found nothing at all weird about their characters' story. But weird it is.

Three high-school-aged sisters in small-town New Hampshire in the late 1960s (Jamey Hood, Amy Eschman, Dana Acheson) have nothing to look forward to but "getting knocked up by the age of 20." Their mill-working father (Peter Friedman) forces them to form a rock band despite any discernible inclination or talent on their part -- not to better their position in life, but his. He names the group the Shaggs (after the dog stories and the haircut) and calls himself the group's "proprietor." Against all logic, the trio actually gets some performing dates and self-produces a record that becomes a mini cult favorite. It betters their lives not at all.

Fortunately, the music we hear is not that of the real Shaggs, which is only sampled to demonstrate how truly terrible it was, nor even an attempt to replicate their lack of style.

Director John Langs, who developed the story with Madsen and Gregory, keeps the horrific story moving in sprightly fashion. The four-piece band (musical director Aaron Gandy plus Brian Silvoy, Jason DePope, and Felipe Torres) is terrific. Dialect coach Amy Stoller deserves a deep bow for keeping the whole cast in authentic-sounding accents, even when singing. But the unnamed wigmaker needs pruning shears. These girls -- and their one friend, Kyle (Bill English) -- may have their faults, but they are not Medusas.

"The Shaggs: Philosophy of the World"

Presented by PenneySeal Productions and AWOL Theatre Project, Inc. as part of the New York Musical Theatre Festival at the Samuel Beckett Theatre, 410 W. 42nd St., NYC, Sept. 27-Oct. 2.