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normally 32/31V

# Queen's loyal subjects

London loves *We Will Rock You*, a ditsy musical based on songs by Queen. But will it play in the States? **By Michael Giltz**

**We Will Rock You** ■ Written by Ben Elton ■ Directed by Christopher Renshaw ■ Starring Tony Vincent, Hannah Jane Fox, and Sharon D. Clarke ■ Music supervised by Brian May, Roger Taylor, and Mike Dixon ■ Dominion Theatre, London (through August 17)

I once sat next to Brian May, guitarist for Queen, during a West End performance of the all-male *Swan Lake*. He turned to me at intermission and said, "Freddie would have loved this."

Would Freddie have loved *We Will Rock You*, the new U.K. stage musical that showcases Queen's music? Well, why not? In this silly, sci-fi variation on *Mamma Mia!* Queen is, after all, key to saving the world, and Freddie himself is sweetly eulogized along with a string of other rock stars gone too soon.

Brian May is a supervisor of *We Will Rock You*, along with bandmate Roger Taylor. It's set 300 years hence, on a thoroughly globalized Earth now known as Planet Mall. Musical instru-

ments are banned, music is restricted to computer-generated pap, and all citizens are apparently forced to wear unflattering aerobic-workout clothing. Our hero—Galileo Figaro, a young lad plagued by dreams filled with rock lyrics—refuses to conform. He escapes with his goth girlfriend into the wilderness, where the rebellious Bohemians have been awaiting a hero to pull out the ax from the "place of living rock," thus freeing the music-deprived populace. (No points for guessing that *ax* here means *guitar*, and *rock* means—oh, you get it.)

The show is, of course, complete bollocks, and London reviewers have savaged the production, reported to have cost £7.5 million (nearly \$11 million). Freddie might have expected at least a little more queerness—or indeed, sexiness of any kind: Even after making love, our hero keeps his shirt on.

The desperately savvy book by Ben Elton tries to acknowledge the absurdity of it all. But the fact is, *We Will Rock You* is just the latest in a long line of

British musicals that use the merest slip of a story to stage miniconcerts of beloved hits. From *Beatlemania* to *Buddy* (as in Holly) to *Mamma Mia!* these shows have delighted British audiences, who love a clap-along and will sing out choruses at the drop of a hat.

The U.K. audience I sat with ate this show up, with its note-for-note renditions of "Fat Bottomed Girls," "We Are the Champions," and so on. The medley of hits at the finale had the crowd roaring until a question flashed on the stage: DO YOU WANT "BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY"? Then the crowd got really loud.

Most of these shows don't work in the United States—something partial backer Robert De Niro is probably keenly aware of. While *We Will Rock You*'s script can be adapted for America, there's no substituting the passion U.K. audiences feel for one of the most wonderfully melodramatic bands in rock and roll. ■

*Giltz writes for various publications, including the New York Post.*

Welcome to Planet Mall, where the Company Computer generates all the tunes and hits are programmed years in advance.

