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PRISCILLA, QUEEN OF THE DESERT -- THE MUSICAL * 1/2 out of **** PALACE THEATRE

Bachelorette parties have a new go-to destination. The musical *Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert* offers silly costumes to let them giggle, enough male flesh in fabulous shape to let them squeal and plenty of songs they already know to let them sing along. Best of all, there's only a wisp of a plot to distract them from their revelry.

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Unfortunately, anyone who comes to the show expecting a little heart and soul from the movie along with high heels and glitter will be sorely disappointed. It would be nice to say *Priscilla* is harmless fluff. But it just isn't true. The story is familiar if unusual: A drag queen gets a call from his one-time wife who says their little boy wants to meet his daddy. (He is six, after all.) Why not bring some friends along and stage a show at her casino in the middle of nowhere, specifically Alice, Australia? Before you can say "road trip," our hero Will Swenson is in a fabulously decked out bus with his sparkly friends Bernadette (Tony Sheldon), a voice of world weary wisdom; and Felicia (Nick Adams), the bitchy one who gets under Bernadette's skin, loves Madonna and just wants to have fun!

So do we, but it's not to be. A disco ball appears at the very beginning, with a trio of divas floating over a neon bridge belting out "It's Raining Men." The crowd claps hopefully, with a couple of cartoonish costumes and a big cast revving the engine up. But that's about it for visual flair. Old disco tunes come and go at random. At one point some confetti comes down in the first act; it could have happened at any moment and you wouldn't blink an eye. That's not a good thing when confetti falling on the audience feels arbitrary; your reaction should be a smile of delight, not "why now?"

Where to begin with the problems? The book by Stephan Elliott & Allan Scott is flat, with mild jokes from the movie joined by milder rejoinders here. The high point, as such, is a gag about highway roadkill that climaxes by having them run over a Teletubby. The emotional pull of a father looking to connect with his son but fearing rejection is raised at the beginning and resolved at the end in about five minutes flat.

The three leads have so-so voices at best here (half the time they are lip-syncing to songs belted out with flair by the divas). Will Swenson (so magnetic in *Hair*) feels anonymous here and struggles with most of his songs (the random inclusion of "MacArthur Park" is his best number). Sheldon is a pro at this in Australia but must compete with the tremendous gravity Terence Stamp brought to the role in the film. It's not a draw. Adams has the best time of it with his flippant lines, not to mention being in such spectacular shape that some of those brides-to-be might reconsider their standards for what a man can look like.

The biggest problem -- literally -- is *Priscilla* itself. Much of the film takes place on and around that big bus. They've dealt with this on Broadway by plopping a gigantic bus right in the middle of the stage and basically leaving it there. Sometimes it rotates to the left; sometimes it rotates to the right. Sometimes the side lifts and we watch the fellows trading quips on the bus. For those scenes, they're stuck in a tiny set with a whole lot of nothing surrounding them on the stage. It feels lumbering and literal. Perhaps the bus should have been fanciful (composed of gigantic high heel shoes?) or playfully part of their imagination. Anything other than the hulking hunk of metal delivered by Brian Thompson. The costumes by Tim Chappel & Lizzy Gardiner are diverting for a while. But even there we become jaded too quickly. If they are painting the bus, we know dancers will come on stage decked out as giant paint brushes and we merely shrug.

Whatever modest magic was conjured by *Mamma Mia* -- which has a similar clutch of great songs and an equally thin plot -- is not conjured here by director Simon Phillips. The film and the actors involved all deserved better. Lessons are learned by the lads. But the only lesson we take away is the old one: all that glitters is not gold.

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 The Hallway Trilogy: Rose ***
 The Importance Of Being Earnest ** 1/2
 The Interminable Suicide Of Gregory Church *** 1/2
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 Les Miserables ***
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 The New York Idea **
 The Nightingale and Other Short Fables at BAM ***
 Other Desert Cities **
 Our Town with Helen Hunt ***
 The Pee-wee Herman Show ***
 Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert -- The Musical * 1/2
 The Road To Qatar *
 Room ***
 The Scottsboro Boys ****
 Small Craft Warnings zero stars
 Three Sisters (w Maggie Gyllenhaal and Peter Sarsgaard) *** 1/2
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