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## Theater: *Rock of Ages* Still Breaking Records (In Every Sense) On Broadway

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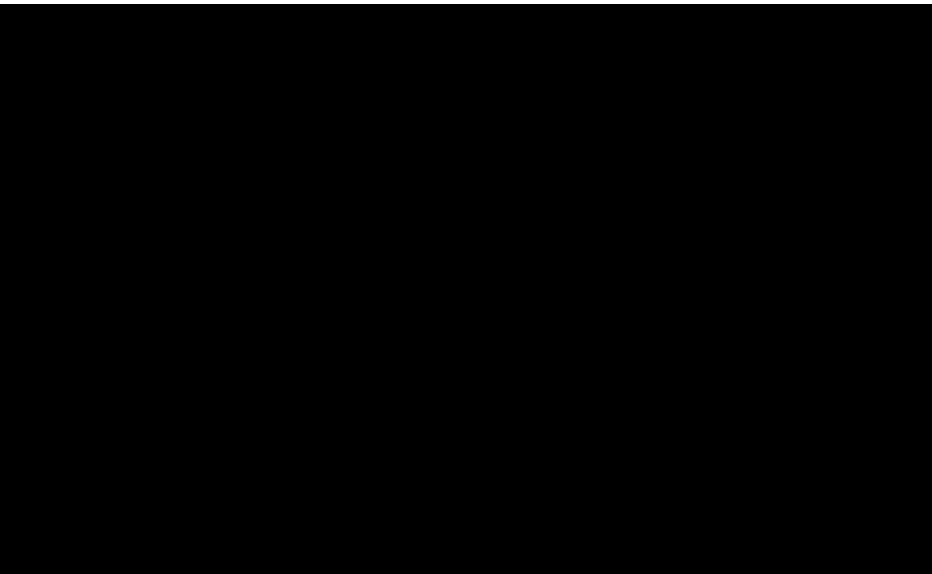
### ROCK OF AGES HELEN HAYES THEATRE

The musical *Rock of Ages* is chugging along in Broadway's smallest house (the Helen Hayes Theatre, which seats just under 600 and is nicknamed the Little Theater) but it's become one of the biggest hits in history.

The records keep falling: the show just broke onto the list of the 50 longest running shows in Broadway history, passing *Jekyll & Hyde* to do so. It's one of five jukebox musicals in the Top 50, including *Mamma Mia* (the music of ABBA), *Jersey Boys* (Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons), *Smokey Joe's Cafe* (composers Leiber and Stoller) and *Ain't Misbehavin'* (Fats Waller). It's also one of

seven shows on that list that are still running on Broadway (led by 25 years and running megahit *The Phantom of the Opera*). On April 7, it reaches its fourth anniversary since the show opened. (It began previews on March 22, 2009.) It has also productions touring the country and with sit-downs in Las Vegas and London (which recently switched to a smaller house, just like the Broadway *Rock of Ages* wisely did two years into its run).

Here's video of opening night, when everyone was thrilled to be on Broadway (after starting at a tiny club on the Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles in 2005 and opening Off Broadway in 2008).



They surely never imagined the show would still be selling out about 90 percent of its seats four years later and if you asked them why it worked so well, the only honest answer is "Who knows!" A recent visit to the show found it in typical form for a long-running hit -- perhaps a little flabby (just like many audience members, including myself) but clearly offering what people expect: a cascade of '80s pop-rock hits (heavy emphasis on hair metal bands like Whitesnake and Poison) and a boy-meets-girl storyline just cause you have to have a story as an excuse for the songs, dude! The theater that night was apparently sold out almost entirely to employees of a

company taking its team on a junket so they were even more rambunctious than usual, especially after the show worked in a quick joking reference to the company's business. (Pool supplies, if I'm not mistaken.)

You can't help pondering what elements of "the best night on Broadway" -- as their ads cannily tout this crowd-pleaser -- have helped it hit such rarified heights. Most people would begin with the roster of familiar hits that fill the show -- songs like Night Ranger's "Sister Christian" and Pat Benatar's "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" and Europe's "The Final Countdown." Amusingly, "Cum On Feel The Noize" is here and Americans will think of Quiet Riot while in London they surely recall the original smash hit by Slade. But lots of jukebox musicals have famous catalogs but close quickly. If all you needed were familiar songs, this spring's *Motown The Musical* will run for 20 years.

But my first choice for the most essential elements of the show are the scantily clad women. The female chorus and lots of the actresses are dressed in sexy, cute clothes, whether waitressing at the Bourbon Room where our hero is hoping to become a famous rock star (after he finishes cleaning out the bathrooms and taking out the garbage) or at the strip club where they head when acting doesn't quite pan out. Broadway caters heavily to women (they make up 60 percent of theatergoers in a typical season) so shows like *Jersey Boys* and this that can appeal to men without alienating women are manna from heaven. You can just see the guys in the audience watching the girls in their naughty outfits dancing and singing "I Hate Myself For Loving You" and thinking to themselves, this Broadway isn't so bad.

Then you have the songs, shoehorned in this way and that, with only a word or phrase needed as an excuse to tie a song into a scene. The crowd favorite was unquestionably Poison's #1 hit "Every Rose Has Its Thorn," which had the entire audience singing along. (This isn't a show where you have to remain quiet. Air guitaring is encouraged.)

Then there's the gay subplot, which reminds the audience, hey this is a Broadway show after all. It's a bait and switch, actually. The son of a German developer who wants to tear down the Bourbon Room for a strip mall seems gay and proudly displays more spandex than Olivia Newton-John in the "Let's Get Physical" video. He seems like jokey gay comic relief until the lad insists, "No, I'm not gay. I'm just German!"

It turns out the real gay subplot involves the two regular, middle aged guys who run the bar. They finally declare their love for each other by singing REO Speedwagon's "Can't Fight This Feeling" to raucous applause and laughter at the performance I attended. (The laughter is over silly choreography the cast indulges in.) It's a canny choice of song. Something like an Air Supply tune might have been too much like mocking them; but a cooler song might have spoiled some memories. Even in the pantheon of 80s pop-rock hits, REO Speedwagon falls comfortably in the anonymous middle -- catchy enough to be recognized but not "important" enough to ruffle any feathers.

But I think one key element seems almost like a throw-away at the very end. The show finale (before they all sing Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'") involves a run-down of what happens to the various characters. Their fate -- almost always happy -- is revealed along with the comforting aside that "they're still rocking!" And what happened to our hero with dreams of being a rock star and his girlfriend Sherrie who dreamed of being an actress? Their dreams of fame didn't come true. Turns out they live in suburbia and have a kid. But the show quickly reassures us that sometimes the dreams you arrive with aren't the dreams you leave with and, hey, they're still rocking!

So a show about rock stars and wannabes ultimately celebrates making a regular life for yourself and not getting all worked up over what might have been or never could be. It's a comforting message for people who may have been in a band in high school or performed in a play or two in college and wondered "what if." And even if you never dreamt of fame, you can at least sing along to all the hits.

Still, my two favorite moments came out in the lobby. Right before the end of act one, that's where I spotted one of the staff members by the bar (surely an aspiring actor) singing along and recreating the moves on stage that were happening right at that moment. Then heading downstairs to the restroom I saw walls lined with rock photos and posters...and in pride of place, a large oil painting of Helen Hayes, the first lady of the American theater. Draped over one corner of the frame? A pink bra.

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