

One of the strengths of "The Carol Burnett Show" was its ability to take on a movie with equal amounts of respect and mockery.

That spirit lives on in "**Baby Jane**, the Musical" at Roxy's Downtown, which handles the 1962 film "**Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?**" with both homage and parody.

With a script conceived and written by Roxy's CEO John Hammer, "**Baby Jane**" balances the melodramatic eeriness of the film with a free spirit often played for laughs.

The fact that its two lead female characters are played by men is something that's forgotten rather quickly.

John Bates brings a grace and sophistication to the role of Blanche (Joan Crawford in the movie), a wheelchair-bound former movie star held captive by her younger sister in a second-story bedroom that's part of the impressive set that Hammer and Robert Morris designed.

Monte Wheeler plays the crazed sister **Baby Jane** (Bette Davis in film), wearing a thick layer of makeup that gives the character a permanent grimace. Wheeler has a heyday on stage, alternating from drunken stupor to wild rage to trying to recapture the fame and fortune of **Jane's** child-star past.

The two make for worthy onstage adversaries, often getting into physical confrontations that are nicely choreographed by director Rick Bumgardner.

Ray Wills dons a Beatles wig for an amusing turn as the greedy accompanist who's taking financial advantage of **Jane** while she is determined to make her showbiz comeback. And Karla Burns is solid as Blanche's caretaker, lending her soulful voice in one of "**Baby Jane's**" musical pieces.

The musical's soundtrack, performed by music director Steve Rue leading a four-piece orchestra, is a mishmash of tunes from a Beatles standard to modern hip-hop and a classic rock standard that closes out the show. Giving away the titles would ruin the surprise of several of them, but it's safe to say you won't think of those songs in the same way again.

Music plays a key role in much of "**Baby Jane**," as the drama builds to a climax with accompaniment worthy of old-time TV soap operas, and a 1980s pop hit is used several times – maybe once too many – as an aural punchline.

The rest of the cast includes a rotating performer as the busybody neighbor Mrs. Bates. Former newscaster and talk-show host Sierra Scott played the role in the first week, while understudy Deb Goin filled in last weekend with two more mystery female VIPs on tap for its next two weekends. (The run is scheduled to continue through Halloween, taking Oct. 19-22 off so Roxy's can host a portion of the Tallgrass Film Festival.)

While Hammer's script is solid and satisfying to those who adore "**Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?**" and neophytes to the movie, a few too many times f-bombs and the like are overly relied upon as punchlines. At times, they seemed as out of place as Blanche's present-day wheelchair.

Hammer and Bumgardner do effectively use newly installed projection equipment to both give "**Baby Jane**" a theatrical rarity of opening credits (although it suffered a glitch during last Friday's production) and graphically showing **Jane's** onstage downward spiral.

Roxy's "**Baby Jane**" is ultimately satisfying for those enjoying a good and often campy laugh, as well as those whose TV dials often land on Turner Classic Movies.

'**BABY JANE, THE MUSICAL**' When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays, through Oct. 29 (except the weekend of Oct. 19-22, during Tallgrass Film Festival activities), and Tuesday, Oct. 31 What: Premiere of a

stage musical version of 1962 classic movie
Where: Roxy's Downtown, 622 1/2 E. Douglas, Wichita
Tickets: \$20-\$30, from the Roxy's box office, 316-265-4400 or roxysdowntown.com

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