

MUSIC

'TINA: The Tina Turner Musical' in Madison is simply the best

By Victoria Davis | Special to the Cap Times

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Ari Groover as Tina Turner and John Toney Bass in the North American tour of "TINA - The Tina Turner Musical." Matthew Murphy

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Admittedly this review's headline might be one most people could see coming from a mile away. But after Zurin Villanueva's explosive performance of "The Best" as legendary singer Tina Turner, how could we choose any other headline?

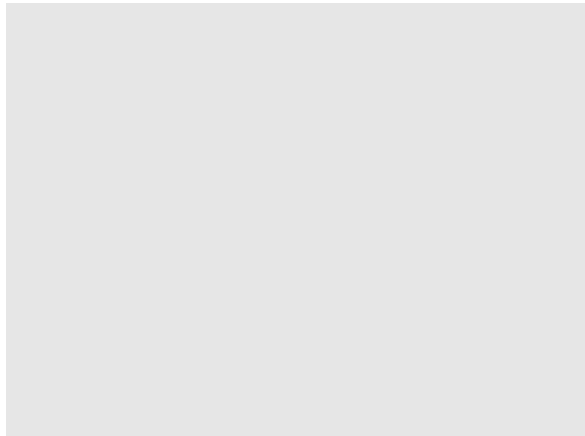
"TINA: The Tina Turner Musical," which premiered in London in 2018 and opened on Broadway the following year, is a jukebox musical featuring the songs of the late 12-time Grammy Award winner, born as Anna-Mae Bullock but crowned the "Queen of Rock 'n' Roll." The show runs in Madison at Overture Hall through Sunday, June 16.

The glitter bath of a show, written by a team that includes Pulitzer Prize winner Katori Hall, depicts Tina's life from the 1950s to the 1980s, starting from her time as a church choir singer in Nutbush, Tennessee, where she was abandoned as a child by both of her parents. The show depicts Tina's journey with music, Buddhist and Baptist spirituality and motherhood, all the way to where she splits from bandleader and ex-husband Ike Turner to make a comeback in her solo career.

The musical features 23 of Turner's songs, spanning her vast discography. Child actor Symphony King kicks things off strong, playing a young Anna-Mae and singing a powerful rendition of "Narbush City Limits" that conveys the impulsive nature and endearing volume of a young girl with big dreams.

As Anna-Mae's mother Zelma, played by Roz White, reprimanded the child for being "always too loud," a chuckle reverberated through Overture's audience. Though Zelma means it as an insult, her words

foreshadow Tina's legacy and greatest asset. And when a young Anna-Mae is abandoned by her parents, King howls in beautiful but distressing melodies, swaying as the stage's large background screen shows the speedily changing seasons.



Zurin Villeneuve plays Tina Turner in "TINA" at Overture Hall through Sunday.

MATT MURPHY

Now enter Villanueva as a grown-up Anna-Mae, being raised by her maternal grandmother, Gran Georgeanna (Carla R. Stewart). Villanueva and Stewart's duet for "Don't Turn Around" is heart-wrenching.

The most tearful number by far is Villanueva's "I Want to Take You Higher," sung just after Tina gives birth and while husband Ike, played by Deon Releford-Lee, cheats on her, continuously snorting cocaine in the background on a bed. Villanueva seeks solace in a Buddhist chant, "nam myoho renge kyo," taught to her by one of the background dancers just before the dancer makes her escape from Ike's band. A video projection displays a mess of color, swirling and colliding as Villanueva desperately recites her chant.

This number, more than most in the musical, shows the true strain of what Tina had to endure. (The role itself is so taxing that Villanueva and Ari Groover take turns playing Tina every other night.) King also switches off the role of young Anna-Mae with Brianna Cameron.

Projection designer Jeff Sugg does an incredible job at accenting Mark Thompson's set pieces as well as illustrating Tina's mental health through each stage of her music career. For the majority of Tina's time with Ike, the projections show blurry images and nonsensical, psychedelic color clashes.

As Tina starts to branch off from Ike, beginning with her solo recording session with Phil Spector (Eric Siegle), those colors start to take shape. When Tina performs "Proud Mary" just after being hospitalized for an overdose — having decided finally to "teach Ike a lesson" — the background projection shows wheels that turn and change colors with Tina's dance moves, choreographed by Tony Award nominee Anthony

van Laast. She's done with Ike, done with drugs, and done with not fighting for her freedom.

Freedom plays a big role in the musical's third act, summed up perfectly by Villanueva's line, "I don't wear miniskirts to be sexy. I wear them so my legs can be free!" The costumes and show set-ups for Tina's performances in the third act are an expression of the freedom she has earned after 16 years of being a "prisoner of your love" for Ike.



Zurin Villanueva plays Tina Turner in "TINA" at Overture Hall.
MATTHEW MURPHY

Now, the Afros are out and the bellbottoms are on. If there becomes a national shortage on glitter, the culprit would surely be the set and costumes for "Disco Inferno." It's a blast to watch, especially when disco lights cascade into the audience. Though Tina struggles to support her two sons and keep her house, the freedom she expresses in her music and performance is filled with joy.

The most joyous number in the production, following Tina's romantic reconciliation with Erwin Bach (John Battagliese) is Villanueva's performance of "The Best," for which the real Tina received a double platinum certification in the UK.

This part of the show is meant to reflect a concert Tina gave in front of 180,000 people in Brazil. It's believable, from the 10-piece band and three-leveled stage, to the dozens of stage lights and Tina's name projected in gold on the background screen.

This may have started as a musical but, by the end, "TINA: The Tina Turner Musical" is a full-fledged concert. And what's a concert without an encore song or two?

"TINA - The Tina Turner Musical"

Through Sunday, June 16

Overture Hall, 201 State St.

Tickets: \$25 to \$159; (608) 258-4141 and overture.org

Running time is 2 hours and 45 minutes with one intermission

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