

THEATER / Jayne Blanchard

'Bat Boy' is delightfully creepy

Bat Boy The Musical" is like no show you've ever seen. It is also like every show you've ever seen.

Perhaps the first musical inspired by a story in the Weekly World News tabloid, "Bat Boy" is also no doubt the first show to have a freakish genetic accident as its star unless you count Siegfried and Roy. Kidding, just kidding.

Unfortunate lab experiments have spawned such monsters as Dr. Frankenstein's creation and superheroes such as Spider-Man, but Bat Boy (Patrick O'Neill) is different: he can sing and dance divinely, for example. He can also climb all over the set like an escapee from "Cats" and, like the Phantom of the Opera, you never know where he is going to turn up.

The unorthodox subject matter is what's so much fun about "Bat Boy." For instance, other than "Floyd Collins," it is one of the few musicals taking place in an abandoned cave. And it has a leading man who can't help his compulsion to suck the necks of warm-blooded creatures — probably not everyone's cup of tea, Anne Rice devotees aside. But the show itself is a zinger-laden pastiche of Broadway musicals ranging from "My Fair Lady," "The Lion King" and "Rent" to "Little Shop of Horrors," "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," and a splash of "Urinetown" thrown in.

This swift-moving sendup of musical conventions and B-movies is directed with tongue-and-cheek

flair by Mike Chamberlin and features a young, hungry cast who are game for practically anything. How they keep up the almost terrifying energy for nearly three hours is astonishing, even more so when you consider many of the cast members have multiple roles. Even the slip-ups have a certain dash to them. Near the end, Terry Crummit, who plays both a pregnant farm wife and a redneck (in-

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explicitly wearing a fur Cossack hat), had to make a too-quick costume change and rushed onstage, apron strings and pregnancy pouch a-dangling, without missing a note. Now that's show biz.

"Bat Boy" centers on the discovery of a half-boy, half-bat in a cave in a West Virginia town so devastated by the collapse of the coal mining industry that the residents are trying to raise cattle on the side of a mountain. Trouble is, the aerobized cows look more like Weight Watchers success stories than

prime USDA meat on the hoof. This town is so downtrodden the social event of the year is a tent revival.

The town of Hope Falls is looking for a scapegoat and Bat Boy seems to fit the bill. However, he is staunchly defended by Meredith (Lauri Kraft), the oppressed wife of a veterinarian, and her yearning-for-a-first-love daughter, Shelley (Tara Giordano). They teach him how to read, and he rapidly moves from picture books to the entire PBS-sanctioned canon, how to speak and how to sing like an angel, albeit an angel with a nasty overbite. With his Victorian conventions and English accent straight out of the BBC, he reminds you of the Elephant Man. The vet, Dr. Parker (Buzz Mauro), who makes his initial entrance with two dead mallards around his neck which he nicknames "Fricasse" and "Cacciatore" has more nefarious thoughts and motivations.

How will Bat Boy survive in a society both fascinated and repulsed by such a creature? How will Shelley explain to her friends at the mall her rather unusual choice of boyfriends?

It is all more than faintly ridiculous and high camp, both of which are enhanced by Mr. O'Keefe's wickedly clever lyrics. He gives simple rhyme schemes such a witty tweak, for instance, in the lyrics "there is no minin'/the cows is dyin'" and "He was kicked repeatedly as a child/And that was wrong" and myriad other corkers.

"Bat Boy" is over the top. How many shows do you know pull off a parody of "The Lion King,"

using inflatable swim rings, right before a climactic love scene? But the cast plays everything with a cheeky earnestness, led by Miss Kraft as the ever-supportive 1950s mom who hides a horrible secret under her starched apron. Miss Kraft is joined in sunny good nature by the talented Miss Giordano as her optimistic daughter. Mr. O'Neill as Bat Boy is not only nimble physically, but vocally. He sings like a demented choirboy, and also convincingly delivers the bleats and bat-like squeaks that make you wonder about his true parentage.

Studio Theatre has chosen to present "Bat Boy" in an as-yet unconverted studio space just down the alley from the theater. It is utterly atmospheric, creepy and damp as a cavern. The verite extends to the seats, which are vastly uncomfortable wooden bleachers the audience wiggles in for almost three hours. So, be forewarned: dress warmly and bring along a cushioned seat of the type usually toted along to sporting events. You'll need it.

★★★

WHAT: "Bat Boy The Musical" by Keythe Farley, Brian Flemming and Lawrence O'Keefe
WHEN: Wednesdays through Saturdays, 8:30 p.m.; Sundays at 7:30 p.m., through Dec. 8
WHERE: Studio Theatre Secondstage, 1333 P St. NW
TICKETS: \$30
PHONE: (202) 332-3300
MAXIMUM RATING: FOUR STARS