



## ROCKY HORROR ROADSHOW

A Wednesday night at Auckland's His Majesty's Theatre. *The Rocky Horror Show* has been on the road in New Zealand just over a fortnight, and is into its fourth night in Auckland.

6.30pm: Two hours to showtime and counting. The sound and lighting crew, a couple of band members and the first of the cast arrive. In the short time they've been together, they've already built up a strong sense of unity. So strong that the hapless writer seeking a story feels like an intruder as he stumbles around backstage, though everyone is friendly and helpful.

Out front, lighting operator Debbie Sanders is flitting back and forth between her complex control board and the stage. Every light (and there are plenty) must be checked before every performance, along with all the special effects, such as the explosives and the slides, which are used to great effect during the performance.

Images are projected onto an enormous screen of shark's-tooth gauze, which forms the back of the stage. The screen, nearly 20 feet high, had to be imported from Australia, along with the projector, the fishnet stockings worn by most of the cast, and the glitter (not Gary, the stuff he made famous.)

This checking ritual takes about an hour every night. Cleaning is a constant operation, with the way the set is used.

Out into the audience juts a ramp, about 15 feet long. Debbie can raise and lower it hydraulically from her control desk, enabling performers to make their entrances from the body of the theatre. It's this kind of staging concept that makes *Rocky Horror* the attraction it is.

The ramp was built locally by Ray Channon, who's been responsible for staging some of the biggest rock concerts this country has seen. In addition to the main stage, the action also takes place on two scaffold constructions, each one 18 feet tall, on either side of the proscenium.

It's in the top of these that Rocky himself is created, and where Eddie, the greaser, makes his entrance and untimely exit. The lower halves are occupied by the show's narrator, Keith Richardson, and the backup singers.

The scaffolds are never completely dismantled, and the whole thing has been erected in a day and a half, though that was working very fast and practically without a break.

One of the biggest trucks in the country has been hired to transport the enormous

amount of equipment. There are 15 people in the road crew, some of whom work 20 hours at a stretch, loading and unloading the truck, erecting and knocking down the stage, driving from one centre to another.

As tour manager John Griffiths says, working like that tests the sense of humour, and your ability to get on with other people.

Originally, it was intended to bring the Brisbane show to New Zealand, lock, stock and barrel. But Griffiths says that show was so bad, it was decided to start here from scratch.

Finding the right people for the various parts was the biggest problem. The parts are all demanding roles, some of which just couldn't be filled with local talent, though just about every actor and actress in New Zealand auditioned for the show.

Stewart Macpherson of Stetson was in London, and decided to ask Rayner Burton, the original Rocky from the London show, if he'd help out. Luckily, he agreed to play the part and to act as director.

Gary Glitter was the perfect choice for Frank-N-Furter, since he was one of the inspirations for writer Richard O'Brien in creating the part.

Australians were brought in to fill the roles of Brad and Riff-Raff, but the rest are Kiwis, and Burton says he's been most impressed with them. He leaves the show half-way through the Auckland run, not wanting to be committed to a full provincial tour, and having work to do back in London. The part is taken over by an Australian who played Rocky in the Sydney production.

*Rocky* is no shoestring production. In fact, it's probably the most elaborate and expensive touring show this country has ever seen. With 31 people on the road, budgeting has to be tight, but even so, it's estimated about 300 thousand dollars will have been burnt up by the time the tour is over.

Fortunately, audiences have been good. 6.45: Gary Glitter arrives, says hello briefly and dashes for his dressing room. It takes time to get his makeup on and he doesn't like interruptions. Meanwhile, some of the cast are onstage, rehearsing vocal harmonies. The show is constantly being polished, new touches are added, some things that don't gel are dropped.

7.15: rehearsal is over, and some of the cast wander off for a quick coffee before makeup time. From one dressing room come the dulcet tones of Sharron Skelton, running through her opening number for what must be the umpteenth time.

8pm: people are starting to arrive, and backstage the pace quickens. Some of the cast don mutant masks and clothes and go out to warm up the audience a little. Shrieks of laughter testify to the effectiveness of this piece of business.

8.30: A piercing scream stills the conversation from the auditorium. Everyone jumps. Another *Rocky Horror Show* is under way.

It has been said by one much wiser than I that rock operas are made for people who don't like rock music. With *Rocky Horror* that is not the case.

One has to have a certain süss about rock 'n roll and the impact it had on the 50's to best appreciate O'Brien's dippy piece of camp satire.

Brad and Janet are the innocent youngsters, suddenly plunged into a nightmare of hunchbacks, hard rock and kinky sex. Many parents of the 1950's must have had similar visions of the effect this "new music" was having on their offspring. And, like Brad and Janet, they were powerless to resist.

Frank-N-Furter is moral degradation personified. He also plays Colonel Tom Parker to Rocky's Elvis Presley. Rocky is another innocent, his image created by Frank to satisfy his baser urges, just as Parker groomed Presley for stardom and reaped the benefits.

"I made you, and I can destroy you," Frank threatens Rocky at one stage, and Rocky knows he is beaten. But Frank is also a pathetic figure, his image in his own mind being larger than reality. This becomes clear when he is finally exposed and disposed of.

Who knows what O'Brien's ultimate message is? Is there one? Are all heroes human? Is there more in heaven and earth than we could ever know? Do the good guys always win? Does true love always triumph? Is there a Santa Claus?

Brad and Janet learn a lot about themselves from their experiences with Frank, especially that they too have their flaws and should not judge others too hastily. Whether the audience gets the same message is debatable.

Enough of this academic posturing. The show is a delight. The pace doesn't slacken for a moment, the cast is superbly uninhibited, and as entertainment, *Rocky Horror* is a triumph.

There are too many individuals contributing to this show to mention, but praise must go to Gary Glitter for his magnificently poncey Frank, to Sal Sharah for convulsing everybody as Riff-Raff, to Zero for just being Zero, and to Jenni Anderson for casting off her sweet little girl image gained in TV commercials and *Personality Squares* and really getting to grips with the part of Janet.

Staging a show of this magnitude in New Zealand is a challenge and a big risk, but *Rocky Horror* has come through with flying colours.

"We're extremely pleased with the level of achievement we've reached," says John Griffiths. "We've got a first-rate production, and we can be proud of what we've done, collectively."

Duncan Campbell

## L J N D A



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