

## Lincoln High grad Travis Poelle drawing rave reviews as rock pioneer Buddy Holly

By Elaine Bartlett

It's not easy being a legend—just ask Travis Poelle, whose lead performance in *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story* at the San Jose Stage Company has earned round after round of standing ovations throughout the show's run. In his thick-rimmed glasses, strumming his Fender Stratocaster electric guitar and crooning classics like "Peggy Sue" and "That'll Be the Day," Poelle has had no trouble convincing audiences—for a couple of hours, at least—that he's a modern reincarnation of the 1950s rock & roll star who died in a plane crash at the age of 22. But playing a rock & roll icon has a unique set of responsibilities, Poelle says.

"You really have to pay that person homage," he explains, lounging beside the swimming pool at his parents' Willow Glen home. As an actor, "you're limited in your own expression, in a way. It gets to a point of [asking] ... how much do you put of your own interpretation into this man's life? You have to stay true to his cardinal traits."

By all accounts, Poelle has succeeded in that mission. The play—which enjoyed a 12-year initial run in London—has become one of the Stage Company's bigger hits in recent memory, consistently drawing full houses and critical acclaim. Tracing the story of Holly's rise to fame, the play chronicles Holly's beginnings as a country singer in Lubbock, Texas, his whirlwind courtship of and marriage to Maria Elena Santiago, a landmark performance at the Apollo Theater in Harlem—and, finally, the plane crash on a snowy February night in Iowa that killed Holly and fellow rock stars Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper at the height of their popularity.

"There's a lot of feeling of responsibility to the people who lived these lives, and trying to depict them in a way that's true and honest and accurate," says Stage Company associate director Rick Singleton. "Travis has to live the character. ... It's a very demanding role, but he's very sincere in how he plays it. He's a major force in this production."

Already an accomplished actor with several lead roles under his belt, 25-year-old Poelle, a Lincoln High School graduate, was working in the L.A. theater scene and trying to break into TV and film when he landed the role early this year. After studying clips of Holly performances from the Ed Sullivan Show and Arthur Murray Dance Party, and reading interviews with Holly's widow, bandmates and friends, he took the stage at the play's West Coast premiere in Carmel in May. With reviewers using words like "sensational" and "stunning" to describe his characterization of Holly, Poelle has helped to carry the show from Carmel

through two extended runs at the San Jose Stage Company. During the concert segments of the performance, audiences repeatedly go wild.

"It's really fun, but it's eerie," says Poelle. "People come up to me afterward and give me huge hugs ... total strangers ... People have said sometimes they have to kind of snap themselves out of it because they actually think they're watching Buddy Holly. ... It's a huge compliment."

No greater compliment than the unofficial endorsement of Holly's widow, however. During the recent taping of a radio show about the play, Poelle played a handful of tunes for Maria Elena Holly as she listened in over the phone from her home in Houston. On "Peggy Sue," she spontaneously joined in, doing background vocals.

"He also did 'our song,' " said Holly in an interview with the Rose Garden Resident, referring to "True Love Waits," the song her husband wrote for her during their six-month marriage. "Every time I hear that song, I have beautiful memories—and a bit of sadness, but he did it perfect. He sounded just like Buddy."

For Poelle, living up to Maria Elena Holly's expectations is the greatest challenge ahead, now that the play is finally drawing to the end of its successful run. Holly is scheduled to come for the last weekend to sit in the audience and watch as the life of her husband unfolds on the tiny stage.

"It makes me pretty nervous," Poelle admits. "I want to make sure that I do his music justice, and his life justice."

"But it'll be great," he adds with a smile. "It'll be great."

"Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story" is showing through Oct. 26 at the San Jose Stage Company, 490 S. First St.

*Ticket holders for the Oct. 25 performance are invited to attend a pre-show cocktail party and dinner with Maria Elena Holly, starting at 5:30 p.m. at The Agenda Restaurant and Lounge, 399 First St. A post-show party with Holly and the Buddy cast is set for Zoe's Nightclub, 417 S. First St. Tickets are \$150 for the dinner, show and cast party, or \$75 for just the show and the party.*

*On Oct. 26, Maria Elena Holly will be part of a post-show discussion and reception at The Agenda. The show begins at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$60.*

*For tickets to the shows and events, call 408.283.7142. For more information, visit <http://www.sanjosestage.com/>.*

