ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Pure joy: Renegade's 'Rocky Horror' is one hell of a party

BY JANA MARCUS August 4, 2026

Quick Take

Renegade Theater Company throws one unforgettable party with "The Rocky Horror Show," Jana Marcus writes, delivering a wildly entertaining production filled with fearless performances, a terrific live band and the kind of audience participation that reminds us why live theater is unlike anything else.

If you go

Who: Renegade Theater Company
What: "The Rocky Horror Show"
When: Through Aug. 22
Where: Santa Cruz Veterans Memorial Building, 846 Front St., Santa Cruz
Tickets and costume contest info: Click here

If the words "Rocky Horror" instantly transport you back to a midnight movie theater, you're not alone.

Maybe you remember dressing up with friends in fishnets and corsets. Maybe you shouted callbacks until you lost your voice, danced the "Time Warp" in front of the screen or laughed at jokes that wouldn't make it into polite conversation today. For generations of fans, "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" wasn't simply a movie. It was a ritual.

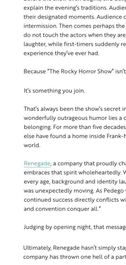
That same wonderfully chaotic spirit is alive and well at Renegade Theater Company's "The Rocky Horror Show."

Long before the house lights dim, downtown Santa Cruz's Veterans Memorial Hall feels less like a typical theater and more like a reunion. The line stretches two blocks down the sidewalk. A man behind me, dressed head-to-toe in a shimmering silver jumpsuit and towering platform boots, smiles as strangers stop to admire his outfit. Around them are unitards, fishnets, sequins, space aliens and enough black lace to stock a costume shop. Everyone is buzzing about the intermission costume contest, eager to see who has gone the furthest down the "Rocky Horror" rabbit hole.

This isn't simply opening night. It's an event.

Richard O'Brien's stage musical premiered in London in 1973 before becoming the 1975 cult film that introduced millions to Dr. Frank-N-Furter and his wonderfully unconventional castle. More than 50 years later, audiences are still singing every lyric, shouting every callback and introducing new fans to the experience.

The current Broadway revival, which earned nine Tony Award nominations, is proof that "Rocky Horror" has never really gone away. It simply keeps finding new generations willing to do the "Time Warp."



Jack Lingscheit as Riff Raff leads the cast through a high-octane version of "The Time Warp" in Renegade Theater's "The Rocky Horror Show." Credit: Jana Marcus

Director Izzy Pedego understands exactly why.

Before the show even begins, two delightfully mischievous ensemble members explain the evening's traditions. Audience callbacks are encouraged. Props have their designated moments. Audience costumes will be judged during intermission. Then comes perhaps the funniest instruction of the night: "Please do not touch the actors when they are in the aisles." The audience erupts with laughter, while first-timers suddenly realize this is unlike any theatrical experience they've ever had.

Because "The Rocky Horror Show" isn't something you watch.

It's something you join.

That's always been the show's secret ingredient. Beneath the camp, corsets and wonderfully outrageous humor lies a celebration of individuality, freedom and belonging. For more than five decades, people who never quite fit anywhere else have found a home inside Frank-N-Furter's wonderfully unconventional world.

Renegade, a company that proudly champions the LGBTQ+ community, embraces that spirit wholeheartedly. Watching a theater filled with people of every age, background and identity laughing, singing and celebrating together was unexpectedly moving. As Pedego writes in the program, "The show's continued success directly conflicts with the idea that conformity, conservatism and convention conquer all."

Judging by opening night, that message still resonates.

Ultimately, Renegade hasn't simply staged "The Rocky Horror Show." The company has thrown one hell of a party.

Karen Ouse gently eases us into Richard O'Brien's wonderfully weird universe with a lovely rendition of "Science Fiction/Double Feature," a nostalgic salute to the B-grade science fiction and horror films that inspired the musical. Moments later, we meet the wholesome Brad and Janet, newly engaged and blissfully innocent as they sing the hilariously earnest "Dammit, Janet."

When their car breaks down on a dark and stormy night, Brad and Janet spot a mysterious castle glowing in the distance and set off in search of help, singing the hauntingly beautiful "Over at the Frankenstein Place." What follows is one of the evening's most beautiful moments. The ensemble quietly fills the aisles carrying glowing lights and lanterns while audience members raise their own miniature flashlights from the evening's callback goody bags until the hall shimmers with points of light.

For a brief, magical moment, everyone is traveling the same road together. The line between stage and audience disappears, creating a breathtaking moment that captures everything this production is about before the glorious madness fully takes over.

Hoping to find a telephone, Brad and Janet are welcomed into the castle by the delightfully peculiar Riff Raff, the castle's caretaker, played with quirky charm by Jack Lingscheit.

Then comes the moment everyone has been waiting for.

Joined by Columbia (Madison Charles), Magenta (Angie Flum) and the full company, Lingscheit launches into a delicious version of "The Time Warp," and the theater explodes from anticipation as this beloved anthem begins. Audience members belt out every lyric and shout the familiar callbacks as if no time has passed since their previous midnight screening, before finally responding with thunderous applause.

Then comes the entrance to end all entrances.

Frank-N-Furter (Alex Cook) warns Brad (Oliver Vold) and Janet (Paris Carter) of what surprises await in Renegade Theater's "The Rocky Horror Show." Credit: Jana Marcus

Alex Cook storms onto the stage as Dr. Frank-N-Furter with a swaggering "Sweet Transvestite" that instantly electrifies the room. Cocky, irreverent, wildly charismatic and so outrageously over-the-top in his skimpy outfit, it becomes impossible to look away. Cook owns every second he's onstage. It's a fearless performance overflowing with confidence, humor, theatrical flair and just enough danger to keep the audience hanging on every entrance.

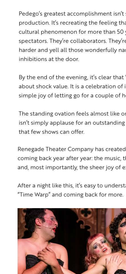
As Frank gleefully dismantles Brad and Janet's carefully ordered world, Paris Carter and Oliver Volk prove to be the perfect pair of innocents. Carter is an absolute delight as Janet, transforming from sheltered fiancée to liberated free spirit with warmth, expressive comic timing, and a gorgeous singing voice. Volk matches her beautifully as Brad, whose own reluctant awakening becomes one of the evening's funniest running gags. His soaring vocals are every bit as impressive.

Madison Charles, as the irrepressible Columbia, brings infectious energy, playful charm and one spectacular high note that earned one of the night's biggest cheers. Greyson Shingu as Frank's creation, Rocky, is wonderfully off-kilter and remains a constant source of laughs. At the same time, the ensemble throws itself into every dance break, every aisle entrance and every audience interaction with complete abandon. Their enthusiasm is utterly contagious.

Frank-N-Furter (Alex Cook) creates Rocky, his idea of the perfect man, with the help of Magenta (Angie Flum) and Riff Raff (Jack Lingscheit) in Renegade Theater's "The Rocky Horror Show." Credit: Jana Marcus

Babe Payne's costumes delight in "Rocky Horror's" anything-goes spirit, sending an endless parade of patent leather boots, fishnets, corsets and wonderfully over-the-top lingerie combinations across the stage. They're playful, campy and exactly what this wonderfully weird world demands.

Music director and conductor Jorge Torrez deserves enormous credit for keeping the evening charging forward. Backed by an outstanding six-piece band, the iconic rock score never loses its momentum. Kiefer Taylor's keyboard work anchors the production, while Maxwell Arthur Sanderson's saxophone injects an irresistible blast of glam rock. Every familiar song arrives like an old friend. Even if you haven't heard this score in years, chances are you'll remember every chorus the moment the music begins.



Madison Charles as Columbia sings "Floor Show/Rose Tint My World" in Renegade Theater's "The Rocky Horror Show." Credit: Jana Marcus

Pedego's greatest accomplishment isn't simply directing a successful production. It's recreating the feeling that has made "The Rocky Horror Show" a cultural phenomenon for more than 50 years. The audience isn't treated as spectators. They're collaborators. They're encouraged to laugh louder, sing harder and yell all those wonderfully naughty callbacks, leaving their inhibitions at the door.

By the end of the evening, it's clear that "Rocky Horror" has never really been about shock value. It is a celebration of individuality, acceptance and the simple joy of letting go for a couple of hours.

The standing ovation feels almost like one final act of audience participation. It isn't simply applause for an outstanding cast. It's gratitude for an experience that few shows can offer.

Renegade Theater Company has created everything that has kept audiences coming back year after year: the music, the madness, the glorious irreverence and, most importantly, the sheer joy of experiencing it together.

After a night like this, it's easy to understand why audiences are still doing the "Time Warp" and coming back for more.

From left, Oliver Volk (Brad), Scottie Tsubota (Dr. Scott), Madison Charles (Columbia), Alex Cook (Frank), Paris Carter (Janet) and Greyson Shingu (Rocky) perform "I'm Going Home" in Renegade Theater's "The Rocky Horror Show." Credit: Jana Marcus