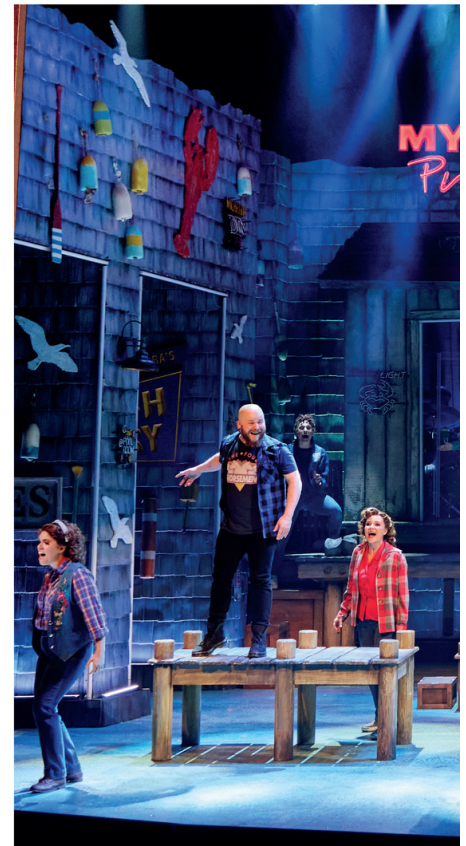


Mystic Pizza



Various music, lyrics **Sandy Rustin** book
Paper Mill Playhouse, New Jersey 29 January – 23 February 2025
 REVIEWED ON 2 FEBRUARY 2025



Alaina Anderson and Krystina Alabado as sisters Kat and Daisy, Jennifer Fouché as pizzeria owner Leona and Deanna Giulietti as JoJo; the hard-working ensemble

Not every old movie has a stage musical begging to burst out of it. Take *Mystic Pizza*, the 1988 romantic dramedy best remembered for showcasing a galaxy of future stars like Julia Roberts (pre-*Pretty Woman*), Lili Taylor, Vincent D'Onofrio and Matt Damon (making his film debut in a one-scene role). There are no memorable songs on the film's soundtrack and none of the characters have ties to music or theatre that suggest a natural reason for them to suddenly stop what they're doing and belt – which is what they now do in a lacklustre production at New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse (where *Newsies* and *Gatsby* had their pre-Broadway trial runs). Moreover, the plot is a busy one, tracing the parallel romantic troubles of three working-class young women, all daughters of Portuguese immigrants, in a coastal Connecticut community built on fishing.

That means there's a lot of ground for Sandy Rustin's book to cover, even before she loads up her central trio with additional agency beyond their romantic pursuits. Daisy (Krystina Alabado), whose uninhibited onscreen persona was softened by Roberts's charisma, now years for a legal career, of all things. It's an unlikely development, given that she's typically overshadowed by her Yale-bound goody two-shoes kid sister Kat (Alaina Anderson), who has unwisely set her sights on an older,

married Yale grad, Tim (Ben Fankhauser). Meanwhile, their perky, chatterbox pal JoJo (Deanna Giulietti, in a standout comedic performance) manages the fallout from

“The lead actresses deliver the generic pop ditties with appealing harmonies”

pending her wedding to long-time beau Bill (F Michael Haynie) by fainting at the altar – a scene that opens the show – and her ambition to one day take over the pizzeria where she and the others have been serving pies for years.

Production credits

Cast Krystina Alabado, Alaina Anderson, Deanna Giulietti, Ben Fankhauser, F Michael Haynie, Vincent Michael, Jennifer Fouché, Mia Gerachis *et al*
Direction Casey Hushion
Music supervision, arrangements Carmel Dean
Choreography Connor Gallagher
Set Nate Bertone
Lighting Ryan J O'Gara
Sound Matt Kraus
Costumes Jen Caprio
Hair, wigs Roxanne De Luna

The additional motivations don't actually deepen these women – who instead appear to have gone through a pizza-like transformation where each has been flattened into a cartoonish, sitcom-ready version of their film roles so that everyone speaks more broadly, and more simply. (Kat is an astronomy buff who schools the Ivy-educated

Tim on... the Big Dipper.) Giulietti flashes wonderful comedic timing, while Jennifer Fouché brings an Earth-Mother groundedness to the role of the pizzeria owner (who sadly never gets her own solo). But Rustin also doesn't go far enough to streamline the story, particularly the clunky first act, which shifts among multiple locations on Nate Bertone's serviceable, neon-accented set.

The music – a selection of mostly '80s radio hits listlessly arranged by Carmel Dean – often seems like it's been pulled from a period playlist left on shuffle. We get multiple reprises of Cyndi Lauper's 'Girls Just Want to Have Fun' and Wilson Phillips's 'Hold On', of course, generic pop ditties which the lead actresses deliver with appealing harmonies and tone. But all too often the songs stop the narrative momentum to leave you scratching your head. Kat and her older crush connect on

PHOTOGRAPHY: Jeremy Daniel



Below Alabado belts familiar '80s numbers **Above** F Michael Haynie (Bill) and standout performer Giulietta



Music from

Van Morrison's 1970 ballad 'Into the Mystic', a choice that only seems on the nose title-wise, since it's completely unrelated to the story, the characters, or the mood of the scene. Meanwhile, Daisy unleashes Melissa Etheridge's 'I'm the Only One' in a jealous rage after spotting her posh preppy boyfriend (Vincent Michael) with another woman – but the unaltered lyrics don't match the moment (in part because she's only hooked up with him once before). Why does Act Two open with 'Manic Monday'? No clue.

The randomness of the musical numbers might not matter if director Casey Hushion staged them with more verve and ingenuity. Kat and her crush don't even look at each other for most of their second-act duet, ironically titled 'When I See You Smile,' while the hard-working ensemble spends more time rolling set-pieces on- and offstage than they do in actual dance breaks. When we do get flashes of Connor Gallagher's choreography, as in the wedding-reception finale, it's like a sped-up version of one of those TikTok '80s dance compilations that rushes from the 'Sprinkler' to the 'Snake' to the 'Kid 'n Play' without elevating any of the moves. *Mystic Pizza* is more of a too-thin slice than a deep dish.

Thom Geier

★★★★☆

Your guide to...

Mystic Pizza

Everything you need to know, at a glance

Movie origins It's based on the 1988 movie starring Julia Roberts (also featuring Matt Damon's film debut), about three female 'pizza-pushers' who live on the Connecticut coast in the town of Mystic. As described by *Time Out*: 'Each woman, through being used and abused by men, achieves some kind of realisation.'

The score The musical features hits from the '80s and '90s by Rick Astley, Cyndi Lauper, Debbie Gibson, The Bangles, Belinda Carlisle and others.

Paper Mill The theatre began life in 1795 as The Thistle Paper Mill, a factory producing wallpaper, tissue paper and books. Actor Frank Carrington and playwright Antoinette Scudder established it as a community theatre from 1934.

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