

STAGE & ARTS

# REVIEW: History or hoax? 'Runestone!' turns over some questions

The tepid rock musical leaves it to the viewer to decide.

By Rohan Preston Star Tribune MAY 10, 2022 — 5:00AM



PHOTO PROVIDED BY HISTORY THEATRE

Sasha Andreev, center, plays Olof Ohman in the new musical "Runestone!" at History Theatre

The Kensington Runestone has its own museum in Alexandria, Minn., two hours northwest of the Twin Cities near where it allegedly was discovered by Swedish immigrant Olof Öhman on a farm in 1898.

An image of this suspected historical artifact was plastered on 2,300 U-Haul trucks a decade ago, spreading across the land. Now, there's a new show opening to further publicize the rune stone — its own rock 'n' roll musical.

Composed by Gary Rue, who also wrote lyrics alongside book-writer Mark Jensen, "Runestone! A Rock Musical" premiered Saturday in St. Paul at the [History Theatre](#). The company is known for doing shows on real Minnesota events and personages — like the murders at "Glensheen," Gordon Parks ("Parks") and the four Catholic "Sisters of Peace."

"Runestone" is a gander into kookiness. Mildly entertaining, the show dances around the question of whether this 200-pound slab of gray sandstone with Germanic writings and a 1362 date is [authentic history or an elaborate hoax](#).

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It does little to settle the matter. Instead, "Runestone" sketches scenarios that ask even more questions, leaving it up to viewers to decide on the authenticity of an artifact that implicitly creates an origin story for Minnesota's Scandinavian settlers.

Director [Tyler Michaels King](#) uses the space and his ensemble well, even if the show lacks dramatic tension. The action takes place in a ritualistic circle created by set designer Joel Sass. That playing space sits in front of a Brian Pekol-led rock band that is nested in thick stalks of corn. Sometimes the metaphors write themselves.

Sasha Andreev is spirited as Öhman, shooing away doubters and naysayers ("Time to Forget What They Say"). He is charming as he fights off scholars and comes back as a ghost who haunts the entire second act. Andreev's emotive singing makes us want to believe his character when he says he's honest, even if we have to suspend gut feelings in the process. It's a hard reach, but we want to go with it.

Ivory Doublette, who plays his wife Karin (plus other ensemble roles), is also capable, whizzing in and out of character. And she's not unique. This hardworking cast includes Eric Morris, whose roles include a competitive farmer and Viking King Magnus, and Jon Andrew Hegge as a professor.

Really, they give it their all. It's just that while the show gets warm at times, it doesn't really catch fire. That may be because the story doesn't create the dramatic tension from which the songs flow. And it's overlong, with perhaps enough narrative for a one-act instead of two.

What "Runestone" does reveal is the sense that any publicity, even in the 19th century, was seen as a key to a future — a way to draw tourists, to get ink and perhaps to sell some baubles. If Öhman were alive today, he would no doubt find another way to be famous, perhaps by creating TikTok memes or leaking a tape of some sort.

For now he has a musical that puts his life and quirks onstage. One cannot begrudge him that. After all, scrolls, tablets and runes figure prominently in many a religious practice. Who knows? Had he been a bit more ambitious, we might be calling him Prophet Öhman or some such today. Instead, as he sings his lament near the end, we have to acknowledge his chutzpah. We're still talking about him more than a century later.

'Runestone'

Who: Book and lyrics by Mark Jensen with additional lyrics and music by Gary Rue. Directed by Tyler Michaels King.

Where: History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul

When: 7:30 p.m. Sat., 2 p.m. Sun., through May 29.

Tickets: \$45-\$60. 651-292-4323 or historytheatre.com.

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