

Viking comedic conquest: History Theatre tells the tale of the Kensington Runestone

[Rob Hubbard](#) May 9, 2022 at 6:53 p.m.



“Runestone: A Rock Musical” at the History Theatre in St. Paul tells the infamous story of Minnesota’s Kensington Runestone and its “finder,” Swedish immigrant Olof Ohman. Performing are, left to right, Adam Qualls, Ryan London Levin, Jon Andrew Hegge, Eric Morris, Ivory Doublette and Wesley Mouri. At center, behind the runestone, is Sasha Andreev as Olof. (Rick Spaulding)

Much discussion is afoot about how history is taught and told, but it seems that it would be a lot more fun to listen to the debate if it were set to a bouncy rock score with an occasional heartfelt ballad and a lot of humor.

That’s what’s going on at the History Theatre in St. Paul right now, where a musical about a Minnesota historical controversy is making a tremendously enjoyable debut.

“Runestone: A Rock Musical” is about a famous or infamous piece of Minnesota folklore. In 1898, a stone was unearthed on a west-central Minnesota farm that was carved with what some claimed was the writing of 14th-century Vikings.

Was it real? If so, it would rewrite the story of European exploration of the Americas, but most experts in ancient languages and cultures suggest that the text and years don't line up well with history. Much evidence points to a hoax.

Ah, but the controversy about the Kensington Runestone's authenticity makes for a surprisingly fun and funny story, especially when you throw in a rock-and-roll score played by an onstage band and sung with spirit by an eight-person cast channeling everyone from Vikings to scholars to opportunistic authors. "Runestone" is a delightfully well-told tale that winks at the sometimes over-the-top histrionics of rock to tell the story of a rock.

Playwright/lyricist Mark Jensen (who grew up not far from Kensington) has been working on this project for over 20 years, hitting paydirt when he linked up with local pop-rocker Gary Rue to make a musical comedy of it. It's now been brought to brisk and lively fruition with the imaginative guidance of director Tyler Michaels King and the comically retro choreography of Stephanie Anne Bertumen.

In an approach made famous by Akira Kurosawa's film, "Rashomon," we see differing theories about the stone in question played out before us, often in tuneful fashion. Was the farmer who found it, Olof Ohman, a shrewd trickster more historically savvy than he let on? Or merely an innocent farmer tossed into a situation bigger than he could handle? And did those who promoted or denied the legend have their own interests in play?

You can contemplate those questions while watching this versatile cast spin through one lively Jensen and Rue song after another, many of them laugh-out-loud funny. That's especially so in the second act, when the chief author promoting the stone's authenticity goes all arena rock on us and engages in a splendidly choreographed debate about ancient linguistics

with a Concordia College professor that devolves into a swordfight when he hatches a new theory with the aid of some knights of the Holy Roman Empire channeling the Beach Boys.

At the center of this storm of activity is Sasha Andreev's earnestly straightforward Olof Ohman, at his best when delivering tender ballads. Everyone else takes on multiple characters, and they prove quite an impressive ensemble. Ivory Doublette may have the best voice among them, as she demonstrates with a mid-tempo blues lament from Olof's wife. And Adam Qualls is a hoot as the writer who takes up the mantle of the stone while Jon Andrew Hegge is a standout as his skeptical nemesis.

Coming in at two hours and 40 minutes, "Runestone" requires a commitment from an audience, but it spins a yarn that may be the most enjoyable history lesson you've had in quite some time.

'Runestone: A Rock Musical'

- **When:** Through May 29
- **Where:** History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul
- **Tickets:** \$65-\$15, available at 651-292-4323 or historytheatre.com
- **Note:** Available for streaming at historytheatre.com, May 23-29
- **Capsule:** A fun, funny and tuneful high-energy history lesson.