

A toast to Jimmy Buffett: Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre makes a party of 'Escape to Margaritaville'



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An ensemble cast shot of "Jimmy Buffett's Escape to Margaritaville" at the Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre. The production, slated before the singer's early Sept. death, continues until Nov. 11.

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What better way to celebrate the life of late legendary singer-songwriter Jimmy Buffett than with a party?

That's the mindset the team at Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre had, anyway.

The theater, located at 510 Centerville Road in Lancaster, premiered its run of "Jimmy Buffett's Escape to Margaritaville" Sept. 22, three weeks after Buffett's death.

Buffett died Sept. 1 from Merkel-cell carcinoma, a rare form of skin cancer. He was 76. Over his five-decade career, he amassed a fervent fan base -Parrot Heads-who relished in the laid-back beach vibes that characterized his music and live shows. His sing-along hits include "Margaritaville," "Cheeseburger in Paradise" and "Fins," just to name a few.

"Escape to Margaritaville" was slated for Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre's 2023 season long before Buffett's death, though his recent passing adds another dimension to the jukebox musical.

"It is safe to say that Parrot Heads and others who know his songs have been touched by his recent passing and are searching for ways to keep connected to him and his music," says Nanci Jo Anderson, Dutch Apple's marketing manager.

That includes Buffett's affinity for the beach.

"We tried to recreate that feeling," Anderson says.

Dutch Apple's lobby is peppered with leis and tropical decorations, complete with an on-site tiki bar, where actors occasionally help serve drinks.

And, of course, there's a clock on the wall stopped at 5 o'clock, a nod to Buffett's song with Alan Jackson, "It's 5 O'Clock Somewhere."

Dutch Apple's staff also leans into the "Margaritaville" theme, with food servers and box office employees wearing tropical shirts.

Many audience members come wearing tropical shirts, too, Anderson says.

The theater also serves Buffett-inspired drinks, including "Margaritaville Margaritas," "The Margarita Our Parents Warned Us About" and "License to Chill," among others.

"When an icon like this dies that you've followed for years ... (you're) going to want to feel that closeness to him," Anderson says.



Rachel (Caitlin Sams) and Tully (Dale Obermark) find love in "Escape to Margaritaville" at Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre. This is the pair's third production of the show they've done together. Off stage, the two are a couple and reside in New York.

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Love in the air

"Escape to Margaritaville" balances serious and meaningful moments with times of deep silliness and playfulness.

The show follows Tammy (Shannon Connolly) on an island vacation as she stays at a hotel called Margaritaville with her best friend Rachel (Caitlin Sams). It's a last hurrah of sorts before Tammy's wedding to a lazy, oft-inconsiderate man named Chadd (Cameron Nies).

The two friends are highly dedicated to their careers, but are in desperate need of a vacation. While at Margaritaville, the two become instant friends with singer Tully (Dale Obermark) and bartender Brick (Victor Legarreta). Sparks fly for Tully and Rachel, as well as Brick and Tammy.

The musical emphasizes the need for love and breaks from the monotony of day-to-day life.

Nancy and Wayne Yingling, of Spring Grove, York County, saw "Escape to Margaritaville" to celebrate their 54th wedding anniversary.

"(The music was) in our era of time," Nancy Yingling says. "It's nostalgic to us."

Songs like "Margaritaville" and "Son of a Son of a Sailor," both featured in the musical, came out in the 1970s – not long after the Yinglings wed.

"Escape to Margaritaville" is special for the actors, too.

Before performing as Rachel, actor Caitlin Sams described herself as a Jimmy Buffett skeptic.

"I never really got to the thoughtful, more story-driven country and folk aspect of his catalog," Sams says. "I thought it was all so silly ... There's actually more going on here than I thought."

Sams has since come around: She has performed as Rachel in three runs of the musical.

"Escape to Margaritaville" has an added meaning for Sams and Dale Obermark (Tully), as they originally met by performing in their respective roles in 2022 at the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre in Florida. (The Broadway Palm is a sister theater to the Dutch Apple).

The two are now dating, though that didn't start until after the 2022 production ended.

"With all the productions we've done, we've had the opportunity to do them together," says Obermark. "That's actually part of the reason why we've returned (to the roles) so many times."

Tributes to Buffett

Buffett's music, impact and legacy live on with small reminders written in the script and displayed on stage at the Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre.

Early in the musical, there's a moment when Margaritaville hotel owner Marley says, "I'll make the best breakfast Buffett you've ever had."

Rachel replies, "It's pronounced buffet."

"I think you're thinking of the singer," Marley says, nodding toward the audience.

While that line has always been in the production, the Dutch Apple cast says they take an extra moment with it in wake of Buffett's death.

"That was definitely the moment where (Buffett's) death colors that scene a little bit more," Sams says.

The on-stage tiki bar displays several photos of Buffett from various moments in his career, Obermark says.

"I'm over there ... always looking at those pictures," Obermark says. "It's a salute to Jimmy and his body of work. ... There's that new element of a new emotional attachment for many of the people coming in."

Obermark and Sams say the actors try to live up to Buffett's legacy and give audiences a top-notch experience each show.

"I think (the production) really does encapsulate a lot of what Jimmy Buffett's lifestyle and mantra was all about," Obermark says. "There's plenty of moments of goofy humor ... really strange, tacky stuff, but also wrapped up within that is a very touching, real story."