

'LIVING FOR SATURDAY NIGHT

Musical adaptation of iconic John Travolta film has all the

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — It's been nearly 40 years since Tony Manero — John Travolta's iconic character in the 1977 film "Saturday Night Fever" — strutted down the streets of Brooklyn's Bay Ridge neighborhood.

But when Matthew Baker, a 27-year-old, British-born dancer, was cast as the white-suit clad disco king in the latest incarnation of "Saturday Night Fever — The Musical," he made a point to walk those same streets.

"I did, I went to Bay Ridge and had a look around and I'm guessing it hasn't changed too much," Baker says by phone during a recent tour stop in Muncie, Ind. "It's still a struggling neighborhood. There's still a lot of sadness. The disco is no longer there of course, but the pizza place from the movie, and the dance studio that we reference in the musical, and even the Manero's house is all still there."

It was during that walk that Baker, who grew up in small-town Kent County, England, realized that he and Manero weren't all that different.

"For a guy in the 1970s, dancing wasn't something you would pursue as a career," Baker says. "It was something you were either good at or you weren't. You went out Saturday night for a drink and a dance. You'd sit at the bar or get out on the dance floor and strut your stuff. It wasn't something you were going to make into a life. When I was a boy, there was always that struggle. Boys didn't go off dancing, especially where I lived. You get a lot of slander for what you do, but you push through if it's something you enjoy."

It's that connection, as much as Travolta's pop-culture changing moves, that fuels Baker each time he steps into Manero's dancing shoes, which includes a perfor-

IF YOU GO

What: 'Saturday Night Fever — The Musical'

When: 7 p.m. Friday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$44-\$60

Contact: 927-1221 or www.themendelcenter.com

mance Friday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

"Everyone remembers John Travolta, so you do kind of have to keep the essence of him in the musical itself," Baker says. "I definitely keep a few things of John's in there — his iconic walk, which everyone remembers from the beginning of the movie. But I like to keep as much of me in there as possible, which is, what I think, our writers and producers liked about our production."

Based on Nik Cohn's 1975 New York Magazine article "Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night" and Norman Wexler's 1977 screenplay, "Saturday Night Fever — The Musical" centers on Manero (Baker), a paint store clerk who comes alive every Saturday night as the king of the local disco, 2001 Odyssey.

He has four close friends: Joey (Michael J. Clark); Double J (Maclain Dassatti); Gus (Benjamin Paul Rowan); and Bobby C. (Lance Borderlon), while Annette (Anna Baker), a neighborhood girl and Manero's would-be girlfriend has become his defacto dance partner.

That is, until Manero spots dancer Stephanie Mangano (Danielle Marie Gonzalez), at the disco one night and the two decide to take part in a dance competition. It's



Photos provided / Carol Rosegg

"Saturday Night Fever — The Musical," starring, from left, Matthew Baker as Tony Manero, Chris Carsten as Frank Manero, Yvonne Strumecki as Flo Manero and Katherine Stanas as Linda Manero, will be performed Friday night at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

through her eyes, that Manero starts to see a way out through dancing, which is only fueled by the tragic events that surround him.

"Everything in the movie and the musical helps Tony in his journey," Baker says. "His family is struggling. His brother has left the priesthood because he wants something better for his life. ... This love interest comes in and shows Tony there is a better life and it's not too far away."

While previous incarnations of the musical — including the Broadway adaptation —

played down some of the film's darker themes, Baker says this production directed by Jeffrey B. Moss with choreography by Denis Jones and musical direction by Skip Brevis has embraced the complexities in both the storytelling and the music.

"There's a song in our version of the musical called 'Stuck,'" Baker says. "That word is used a lot through the play because he really is, he's stuck. I don't think he knows it straight away, because his friends are very content with not having any aspirations in life. Then, this girl comes along who has a

RIGHT

right moves

IF YOU GO

What: Friday Night Fever Disco Party

When: Immediately following the show until midnight

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$20 for ages 21 and older (includes one drink ticket, light appetizers, live DJ, cash bar and dancing)

Contact: 927-1221 or www.themendelcenter.com

Disco Costume Contest: Come to the show dressed in all things '70s – leisure suits, platform shoes, bell bottoms, wide-collared shirts, cat suits, Farrah Fawcett hair, sparkly sequins, gold lame – for a free, pre-show photo opportunity and costume contest, which will take place in the lower north lobby during intermission. First place receives a \$100 Mendel Center gift certificate, second receives a \$50 gift certificate and third place receives a \$25 gift certificate. All three will receive two souvenir cups and two complimentary drinks to enjoy during the second half of the show.



ABOVE AND ON THE COVER: Danielle Marie Gonzalez stars as Stephanie Mangano and Matthew Baker as Tony Manero in the national touring production of "Saturday Night Fever – The Musical," which makes a stop Friday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

little something extra. She's trying to be something more and Tony can see that, and is very attracted to the fact that she can dance and she has that passion. It's through her that he realizes he needs to be doing something. He doesn't know what it is, but he knows he has to get out of the place he is stuck in."

In addition to a few added songs, almost all of the songs from the original movie soundtrack are included in the stage musical, including Bee Gees hits "Stayin' Alive," "Night Fever," "Jive Talkin'," "You Should

Be Dancing" and "How Deep is Your Love?"

"The music is the bedrock," Baker says. "You can't help but nod your head, tap your foot or clap your hands. The music is very powerful. There's a lot of happiness that comes through in the music, but there's also a lot of the same problems that come out in the film that are reflected in there as well."

The "Saturday Night Fever" soundtrack is one of the best-selling movie albums of all time. It remained on top of U.S. album charts for 24 weeks, and in 1979 won the Grammy Award for album of the year.

That fact isn't lost on Baker either. "When people think of the film they think of the music first, don't they?" he says, before humming the opening guitar riff of

"Stayin' Alive." "It was so big in the '70s, but it has also stood the test of time so it has to be exactly right. But that's why it's such a wonderful thing to play this role. It's a bit of everything. He has a real journey. He gets to act, he gets to sing, but most of all, he gets to dance."

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