



## Murder Ballad at SLAC: A Loud, Messy Rock Opera That Knows Exactly What It's Doing

### Description

Salt Lake City, UT As a lesser-known work, *Murder Ballad* which premiered Off-Broadway in 2012 with music and lyrics by **Juliana Nash** and a book by **Julia Jordan** doesn't come with the kind of built-in familiarity that invites a full plot breakdown. Now receiving its regional premiere at **Salt Lake Acting Company (SLAC)**, the production leans into its central tension: desire, and how quickly it can spiral. As a reviewer, I'm not particularly interested in spoiling a show like this especially one built on escalation. That said, the premise is hardly hidden: from the beginning, we know someone will die. It's right there in the title. No surprises just the question of how far it will go.

What follows is less a mystery than a spiral fast, messy, and deliberately heightened. As a rock opera, the story is carried almost entirely through music, with relationships escalating quickly and conflict erupting outward rather than settling into realism. At its core, *Murder Ballad* traces a love triangle between Sara, her husband Michael, and her former lover Tom one that destabilizes as past and present collide. This is the love triangle of all love triangles messy, amplified, and destined to unravel.

To approach *Murder Ballad* as a grounded or psychologically restrained drama would be to misread it entirely. The production commits fully to its form, favoring momentum over nuance and movement over reflection. Once it starts, it rarely pauses. Desire, jealousy, and anger build steadily until they feel almost unavoidable. Depth isn't really the goal here and that's okay. The show is built to be fast, bold, and entertaining, embracing emotional extremes rather than digging for subtlety.

A man wearing a sleeveless black shirt and leather pants poses playfully on a bar counter, surrounded by a crowd of people. Photo by Nick Fleming Courtesy of Salt Lake Acting Company

### Performances

That heightened approach only works if the performances meet it, and for the most part, this cast understands the assignment. At the center is **Collette Astle's** Sara, who navigates the

character's shifting loyalties with a performance that embraces both vulnerability and volatility without over-explaining either. Vocally, Astle brings a textured and raspy edge that adds intimacy and grit to the role, grounding even the show's more heightened moments. Opposite her, **Gray Aydelott**'s Tom leans fully into the role's intensity, delivering a presence that feels impulsive, magnetic, and at times deliberately unrestrained—particularly in "Sara," one of the catchiest numbers in the show, which captures the emotional pull that keeps the central relationship in motion. **M. Scott McLean**'s Michael provides a more controlled counterpoint, though that restraint gradually gives way to something sharper as the emotional stakes rise, with standout vocal moments in songs like "Little By Little (Reprise)," where his high notes cut cleanly through the score.

Anchoring it all is **Latoya Cameron** as the Narrator, whose performance threads the line between observer and participant. Cameron enters casually, chatting with the band in a way that immediately dissolves the boundary between stage and audience, making the space feel less like a theatre and more like a shared hangout. There's an ease to her presence—her laugh, bright and disarming, carries a warmth that draws the audience in before the story begins to unravel. A particularly effective device is how she follows the characters throughout the production, harmonizing with them and weaving herself directly into their emotional landscape, blurring the line between narration and participation.

A man and a woman are embracing on a theater stage, with the woman smiling joyfully and the man  
Collette Astle & M. Scott McLean, Photo by Nick Fleming Courtesy of Salt Lake Acting  
Company

## Music

In a show where the entire narrative is delivered through song, the music has to carry everything—and in this production, it does.

In the second act, **Latoya Cameron** (Narrator) delivers a heartbreaking solo in "Crying Scene Reprise" that showcases both her vocal power and emotional range. It stands out as one of the production's most impressive musical moments, allowing her to shift from control into something more raw and exposed without losing precision. Another striking moment comes in "The Crying Scene," also led by Cameron, when she halts the action to frame the story as a stylized film—black and white, curated, and emotionally aestheticized—reflecting on how crying appears beautiful on screen before cueing it directly. It's a self-aware interruption that leans fully into the show's emotional intensity, and Cameron commits to it completely.

The song leading into intermission, "Built for Longing," performed by **Collette Astle** (Sara), **M. Scott McLean** (Michael), **Gray Aydelott** (Tom), and Cameron, reinforces one of the show's central ideas—that we are built for desire, always reaching for something just out of reach. It's one of the few moments where the show briefly gathers its emotional threads, even as it continues to push forward.

A woman in a black lace outfit performs on stage, gesturing with her hands, in front of a bar illuminated by warm lights. Latoya Cameron, Photo by Nick Fleming Courtesy of Salt Lake Acting Company

## Design

The design work across the production is equally strong. Under the direction of **Cynthia Fleming**, the production maintains a clear sense of momentum, allowing its heightened emotional world to unfold with intention rather than chaos. **Cynthia L. Kehr Rees**'s sound design maintains clarity and control even at the show's most explosive moments—a notable achievement for a rock opera—supported by **Calvin J. Vinson** as Assistant Sound Designer. **David DeCarolis**'s lighting design echoes the shifting mood with precision, with additional support from **Sara Schwartz** as Assistant Lighting Designer. In "The Crying Scene," the choreography and lighting sync so tightly that it feels as though the Narrator is actively manipulating the space, her escalating energy mirrored in lights that flicker and fracture around her.

**Erik Reichert**'s King's Club feels convincingly lived-in, less like a theatrical set and more like a functioning venue, while **Adriana Lemke**'s choreography adds a layer of physical intensity that is both controlled and genuinely impressive.

The band—featuring **David Evanoff** on keyboard, **Mark D. Maxson** on guitar, **Davin Tayler** on bass, and **Kendall White** on drums—drives the production with a constant, pulsing energy. In a show like this, they are more than accompaniment; they are the engine of the piece. The score pushes the action forward, underscoring each shift in intensity and amplifying the volatility at the center of the story. The result is a soundscape that feels immediate and immersive, sustaining the show's momentum from start to finish, with the guitarist adding an extra edge of intensity that cuts cleanly through the mix.

The lighting design further enhances the production's atmosphere, shifting fluidly with the music to heighten tension, isolate emotional beats, and reinforce the club-like environment of King's Club. The space itself feels fully realized—less a staged environment and more a world already in motion.

## Conclusion

And then all hell breaks loose—Sara lashes out, and Tom's presence turns overtly possessive, most notably in "You Belong to Me," which echoes the obsessive tone of "Every Breath You Take" by Police. The show surges into full chaos as the music escalates with it: voices overlap, language sharpens, and the tension explodes outward until it feels like anyone could be the killer. **M. Scott McLean** meets the moment vocally, delivering high notes that wail with clarity and force, while the fight choreography by **Adriana Lemke** adds a layer of physical intensity that is both controlled and genuinely effective. **It's a moment that fully embodies the show's commitment to intensity over restraint—and ultimately, that's where *Murder Ballad* is at its most effective. The choreography ensures that even at its most volatile, the movement remains deliberate and secure. If you want to find out how it all unfolds, you'll have to see it for yourself.**

## Production Details

*Murder Ballad*

**Regional Premiere**

Presented by Salt Lake Acting Company

**Conceived by and with Book and Lyrics by:** Julia Jordan

**Music and Lyrics by:** Juliana Nash

**Run Dates:** April 8 – May 3, 2026

**Tickets:** Starting at \$35

For tickets, contact the box office at (801) 363-7522.

[Tickets](#)

**Cast**

- Collette Astle\* (Sara)
- Gray Aydelott (Tom)
- Latoya Cameron\* (Narrator)
- M. Scott McLean\* (Michael)

**Creative Team**

- Cynthia Fleming (Director)
- David Evanoff (Music Director)
- Erik Reichert (Set Designer)
- David DeCarolis (Lighting Designer)
- Cynthia L. Kehr Rees (Sound Designer)
- Dennis Hassan (Costume Designer)
- Arika Schockmel (Props Designer)
- Adriana Lemke (Fight/Intimacy Director)
- Tahra Veasley\* (Production Stage Manager)
- Bridgette Lehman (Assistant Stage Manager)
- Sara Schwartz (Assistant Lighting Designer)
- Calvin J. Vinson (Assistant Sound Designer & Audio Engineer)

\*Member of the Actors' Equity Association

\*\*Represented by United Scenic Artists Local USA 829

**Accessibility & Special Performances**

- **Open Captioned:** Sunday, April 26 at 6 PM
- **Audio Described:** Sunday, May 3 at 6 PM
- **Sensory Friendly:** Saturday, May 2 at 2 PM
- **ASL Interpreted:** Saturday, May 2 at 2 PM
  
- **Dive Deeper:**
  - [City Weekly Names Murder Ballad an Essential Arts & Entertainment Pick](#)

- [Collette Astle, Gray Aydelott, and Joseph Paul Branca Chat About Murder Ballad with Deena Manzanares on Good Things Utah](#)
- [Cynthia Fleming, Adriana Lemke, and the Cast of Murder Ballad on KRCL RadioACTIVE](#)
- [Latoya Cameron Discusses Murder Ballad on PBS Contact with Liz Adeola](#)

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