

SURFLIGHT REVIEW

This Beauty Can Charm The Beast in All of Us

By TOM WRONA

Dictionary.com defines *curmudgeon* as "An ill-tempered person full of resentment and stubborn notions." Gee, I hope I'm not that bad. By that strict definition, I'm not sure even cranky old Andy Rooney of "60 Minutes" is a true curmudgeon. But I can't deny that I often find faults in plays other people find delightful. Maybe I have more refined tastes than the masses. Or maybe I'm just a tinpot tyrant. I dunno.

In any event, I approached Surflight's current production, "Disney's Beauty and the Beast," with an even more curmudgeonly attitude than usual. I've never seen the cartoon movie or the stage production, which is still running on Broadway. But because it was Disney's version, I knew it would be "Product" with a capital "P". By that I mean it would play us like violins; it would be carefully crafted to push every sentimental button we've got and it would teach the youngsters important "Lessons" as didactically as a high school assembly program.

My assumptions were, of course, absolutely correct. We sighed at the beautiful Belle (Ashleigh Davidson). We booted the pompous Gaston (Christopher Deaton), even as he took his bows. And we learned that you shouldn't judge people by their looks and that reading can take us away to magical lands in our

minds' eyes.

But dammit, I couldn't help liking the whole thing and enjoying myself anyway. It ain't easy to be a curmudgeon when the Disney juggernaut is determined to make you laugh and cry.

I overuse the "Swiss watch" metaphor when a production runs particularly well. But man, this play is a *machine!* There were a few opening night glitches. (The Beast literally flipped his lid. Split pants evoked unintended laughter.) But in this play, the machinery is built-in. Jessica Kaplan's clever sets were among the best I've seen at the Surflight.



And in her first year as the company's costume designer, former apprentice Andi Kerr has shown she has the talent a Disney-style production requires.

The cast was obviously enjoying itself despite wearing what I imagine are the clumsiest and most uncomfortable costumes they may have ever worn. Surflight's own Lunt and

Fontanne, Andrew Foote and Erin Esposito as Lumiere the candle and Mrs. Potts the teapot, were consistently charming, as was Matty Price as Cogsworth the clock. Two newcomers I like more



Photographs by Ryan Morrill

HEADLINERS: Leading roles in 'Beauty' are filled by (left) Chad Coudriet and (above) Ashleigh Davidson and Andrew Foote.

every time I see them are Carrie Tillis, who played the sexy Babette, and Maggie Anderson, who played Madame de la Grand Bouche, a vain woman turned into a vanity. (Disney lays those lessons on with a trowel!)

We were also treated to two fine baritones: David DuPont as Belle's father Maurice, and the aforementioned Christopher Deaton as the scheming he-man Gaston. Between his deeper than deep voice and his stylized costume (the hair on his chest was drawn with an eyebrow pencil), Gaston even looked like he was drawn by a Disney animator.

The standout performance was Ben Liebert as Gaston's sidekick, the homely, whacky LeFou. (LeFou is French for "The Crazy One." Because most of us don't speak French, I guess that's the Disney version of subtlety.) He was good as reporter Pat Gilbert's photographer-sidekick Charlie in last year's "State Fair." But his previously unseen flair for physical comedy makes him a truly inspired choice to play LeFou. He's the "go-to guy" for sidekicks and slapstick.

Even if it hadn't won me over, I don't think I could say anything that would keep the summer crowds away from this favorite the whole family will enjoy. There's even a little double entendre and Can-Can dancing to keep dad awake. But you know, there were two dads my age within a few seats either side of me, and both of them leapt to their feet with the rest of us for a standing ovation. And I'm not sure but I think they were both a little misty eyed like I was. Damn that Disney!

Evening performances run through Aug. 20 at 8 p.m., with matinees at 2 p.m. on Aug. 4, 7, 9, 14, 16 and 21. ■

Bonus Broadway Buff Trivia

Question: Five new songs were added for the Broadway version of "Beauty." How many can you name? I'll give you the answer when I review Surflight's last production of the summer season, "The Music Man," in our Aug. 26 issue.

Last time I asked you to name The Who's second rock opera. It was "Quadrophenia."

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