

Review: Aurora, Outfit re-up on ‘Hunchback of Notre Dame’

LIVING By Bert Osborne - For the AJC



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Haden Rider plays the title role in “The Hunchback of Notre Dame,” a musical co-production of Aurora Theatre and Theatrical Outfit. CONTRIBUTED BY CHRIS BARTELSKI

Posted: 1:30 p.m. Wednesday, July 26, 2017

As musicalizations of Victor Hugo go, “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” is no “Les Miserables.” The good folks at Lawrenceville’s Aurora Theatre probably already know as much, having produced an ambitious (if necessarily pared-down) undertaking of the acclaimed Boublil-Schonberg sung-through version of that latter literary classic — **to such considerable fanfare in 2013** that the company revived it again two years later, with equally popular results.

Although more attuned to the simplistic 1996 Disney animated movie than the epic 1831 Hugo novel, “Hunchback” is appropriately darker in tone than, say, other stage adaptations of Disney’s “The Little Mermaid,” “Beauty and the Beast” or “Aladdin,” all of which also include scores composed by Alan Menken. Still, tellingly, after a couple of regional theater renditions in 2014 and 2015, plans were eventually abandoned to mount “Hunchback” (with song lyrics by Stephen Schwartz and a script by Peter Parnell) on Broadway.

Unfortunately, too, as the third annual season-opening collaboration between Aurora and Atlanta’s Theatrical Outfit, it’s no **“Memphis”** or **“In the Heights,”** either. All three are mainstream musical entertainments, but where those previous shows told more contemporary and socially relevant stories, this one is a swashbuckling period piece that’s less intimate and rather fantastical in nature, replete with a chorus of imaginary friends in the form of singing gargoyle puppets.

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Directed by the unmistakably qualified Justin Anderson — and sumptuously designed (set by Shannon Robert, costumes by Alan Yeong, and particularly atmospheric lighting by Maria Cristina Fuste) — **the co-production continues at Aurora through Aug. 27, before the Outfit transfers it to the Rialto Center for the Arts in downtown Atlanta Sept. 7-17.**

The show's larger musical numbers, choreographed by Ricardo Aponte, are energetically executed by an ensemble of two dozen dancers and singers, under the music direction of Ann-Carol Pence (on keyboards) and a band of eight additional musicians.

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Haden Rider, who most recently starred as **Atlanta Lyric's "Jesus Christ Superstar,"** is an unquestionable talent in his own right, a fine actor and a gifted vocalist who nevertheless seems miscast here, playing the title role of the grotesquely deformed bell ringer, Quasimodo. He affects a raspy quality to deliver his dialogue, and then performs his songs ("Out There," "Heaven's Light") with a beautiful tenor voice. He distorts his handsome face, but that's hardly enough to be truly believed as a character so often described as an "ugly monster."



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David de Vries and Julissa Sabino appear in the Aurora Theatre/Theatrical Outfit co-production of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." CONTRIBUTED BY ... [Read More](#)

Seen to greater advantage are the lovely Julissa Sabino as the gypsy love interest, Esmeralda, and the accomplished David de Vries as the nefarious Dom Claude Frolo. She confirms her status as one of our brightest musical stars, in work as wide-ranging as **"Rent"** (at **Actor's Express**) and **"The Toxic Avenger"** (at **Horizon**). Long renowned locally as a dramatic actor (and, of late, director), his out-of-town credits include stints on Broadway and on tour in "Beauty and the Beast" and "Wicked" — so how wonderful to finally witness for ourselves his own singing skills.

Otherwise, the combined triumphs of "Les Miz," "Memphis" and "In the Heights" ultimately prove to be a hard act for this "Hunchback" to follow.

THEATER REVIEW

"The Hunchback of Notre Dame"

Grade: B-

Through Aug. 27 at Aurora Theatre, 128 E. Pike St., Lawrenceville. 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays; 10 a.m. Tuesdays (Aug. 1 and 15 only). \$24-\$65. 678-226-6222, www.auroratheatre.com.

Sept. 7-17 at the Rialto Center for the Arts, 80 Forsyth St. SW, Atlanta. 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays; 11 a.m. Thursday (Sept. 14 only). \$18-\$51. 678-528-1500, www.theatricaloutfit.org.

Bottom line: The third time is less of a charm.

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