

COVER STORY, THE STUDIO

Theatre Review: ‘The Hunchback of Notre Dame’ at Aurora and Theatrical Outfit

1 DAY AGO by MANNING HARRIS 



Haden Rider and Julissa Sabino (Photos by Daniel Parvis)

Aurora Theatre and Theatrical Outfit are currently co-producing a thrilling, imaginative musical version of Victor Hugo's 1831 novel "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." It is being staged at Aurora through Aug. 27, then will run Sept. 7-17 at the Rialto Center for the Arts, almost next door to Theatrical Outfit.

That transition will have to be an act of wizardry, for Aurora's beautiful, big stage, yet quite intimate audience size (at least in the orchestra section) is perfect for this operatic, vibrant show. (By "operatic," I don't mean it's all sung; it isn't.) The stage is roughly the size of many Broadway theatres which, as you may know, aren't all that big; yet you usually have a perfect theatre experience, with the best possible sound, scenery, and lighting. Of course, you must often pay big bucks for that experience.



David de Vries and Julissa

Sabino

I mention this to praise Aurora for giving us a Broadway experience without having to mortgage your house for tickets. The set design (Shannon Robert), sound design (Daniel Pope), and lighting design (Maria Cristina Fusté) are all perfection. So are the costumes, designed by Alan Yeong and Suzanne Holtkamp.

While we're giving some credit (the theatre program has a complete list), let us say that Justin Anderson's direction adds further luster to his ever-growing body of work. Music director Ann-Carol Pence and her musicians sound more like 25 people than 10; how do they do that? And Ricardo Aponte's choreography is superb; his dancers make everything look easy and effortlessly organic to the story. Anthony P. Rodriguez is Aurora's producing artistic director.

Are you getting the idea that "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" is a really big show? It is. And with music by Alan Menken and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz, both Broadway legends, and a libretto by Peter Parnell, we're in good hands even before the show starts. There was, incidentally, a 1996 Disney film adaptation, from which many of the songs come (there was also the 1939 film with Charles Laughton). The musical play premiered in 1999 and has played in California and at the famous Paper Mill Playhouse in 2015.



Haden Rider

It hasn't played in New York, but I will venture to say that its best chance for Broadway success would be if the show uses the exact stellar cast that Aurora Theatre has assembled. More about them later.

In 1482 two orphan brothers are taken in by the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris. Dom Claude Frollo (David de Vries) is devout; Jehan (Matt Morris) sows his wild oats and on his death bed presents his brother with the deformed child he fathered with a gypsy. The child is called Quasimodo (Haden Rider). Frollo reluctantly but dutifully takes the child and hides him in the cathedral's bell tower.

Twenty years later, Quasimodo is a kind but isolated young man who dreams of seeing life outside the tower. He's grateful for Frollo's protective care, but a group of living gargoyles are his only company and friends. The conceit of the gargoyles works perfectly for me. Think about it: If you were locked in a bell tower for years, hidden from people because of your supposed ugliness, forced to ring cathedral bells until you're almost deaf, you might develop a few imaginary friends yourself.

Handsome young Phoebus (Lowrey Brown) arrives in Paris, excited about his promotion to captain. The lighthearted Clopin (Kevin Harry) comes onto the scene. And into everyone's life comes the beautiful, enchanting gypsy girl Esmeralda (Julissa Sabino). The unhappy, sanctimonious Frollo is attracted to her. But she is more of a kindred spirit to Quasimodo; they are both kind and both outsiders; he is a virtual outcast, of course, solely because of his appearance.



Julissa Sabino

The plot thickens, as they say, full of life and death intrigue; but you'll get no more from me. You really must see the show, and I shall happily tell you why: This cast is outstanding, winning, and with more talent than should be legal.

Julissa Sabino's Esmeralda is magnetic and electric; she sings, acts, and dances like a dream. It's no wonder that everyone who sees her falls in love with her. Ms. Sabino has become one of the most sought after young actors in the city.

It's easy to despise Dom Claude Frollo, played by Mr. de Vries; Frollo is a hypocrite, puffed up with piety and faultfinding (he hates the gypsies because they're gypsies); yet through the actor's subtle, masterful performance, we understand that he is his own worst enemy: his self-loathing is pitiable. Mr. de Fries also sings very well, with numerous Broadway, TV, and film credits.

Lowrey Brown makes Phoebus a hero we can care about; his bravery and vulnerability are very touching. And he is also a fine singer; I remember his excellent work as the lead in Actor's Express' "Company," to mention only one show from a long résumé.

Kevin Harry (Clopin) has a tremendously winning stage presence and is an excellent singer. I remember his many fans and friends teased him when a local newspaper called him "the velvet hammer" for his performance in the title role of "Sweeney Todd," also at Actor's Express.

Finally, we come to Haden Rider, who is a revelation to this viewer. He is magnificent. Yes, you can perceive he has a handsome face under his "ugly" make-up, but so is the beautiful soul of Quasimodo. His character's deformity causes him to limp and to speak in a raspy voice, but when he sings—the beauty of his soaring voice stops you in your tracks and makes the eyes well. To me, he is a miracle of casting because he projects the

kindness and gentleness of people who have suffered and understand persecution. I think that Mr. Rider has a stunning future.

“The Hunchback of Notre Dame” may not be a masterpiece musical like “West Side Story” or some other you may name, but what is? These choices are always subjective. But this perfect cast and totally assured production make this a show not to miss.

For tickets and information, visit auroratheatre.com or theatricaloutfit.org.