



7/22/2017 THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME
Aurora Theatre / Theatrical Outfit (**)

****½ (A)

BACK TO HUGO

Have you noticed that whenever a Disney Animated Feature gets adapted for the Musical Stage, Disney's name appears in the title? It isn't "Beauty and the Beast," it's "DISNEY'S Beauty and the Beast." The version of the 1996 movie "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" seems to be an exception. Although it includes the songs and characters of the movie, it is more in tune with Victor Hugo's original 1833 novel (actually called "Notre Dame de Paris"), including a very dark (and very moving) ending.

Three hundred and forty-eight years, six months, and nineteen days ago to-day, the Parisians awoke to the sound of all the bells in the triple circuit of the city, the university, and the town ringing a full peal.

The sixth of January, 1482, is not, however, a day of which history has preserved the memory. There was nothing notable in the event which thus set the bells and the bourgeois of Paris in a ferment from early morning. It was neither an assault by the Picards nor the Burgundians, nor a hunt led along in procession,

nor a revolt of scholars in the town of Laas, nor an entry of "our much dread lord, monsieur the king," nor even a pretty hanging of male and female thieves by the courts of Paris. ...

What put the "whole population of Paris in commotion," as Jehan de Troyes expresses it, on the sixth of January, was the double solemnity, united from time immemorial, of the Epiphany and the Feast of Fools.

"Hunchback" was first produced in Berlin in 1999 (as "Der Glöckner von Notre Dame") and had its first American production in San Diego in 2014. A few adjustments have been made since 2014, and, now, the show lands on the Aurora stage in a spectacular production, filled with insanely talented singers and a full-voiced ensemble that fills the house with harmony and passion. But, make no mistake -- you will leave the theatre, not with the smile the Disney movie gave you, but with a lump in your throat reminiscent of that other Victor Hugo musical that shall remain nameless here.

In its first departure from the movie, we first see a prologue in which two orphans are taken in by the Cathedral, serious Frollo and happy-go-lucky Jehan. Jehan is caught in the cathedral with a gypsy woman and is soon banished. He returns years later, dying, bearing a deformed child he fathered on his gypsy lover. Jehan dies, and, duty-bound, Frollo agrees to raise the child. He keeps the boy a virtual prisoner in the Cathedral's Bell Tower, where the boy, Quasimodo, soon develops a kind heart insulated by the deafness caused by the great bells.

The rest of the plot follows the movie (semi-sorta) -- the Feast of Fools, the Gypsies led by Clopin, the humiliation of Quasimodo, the kindness of Esmeralda (here as much an outsider to the gypsies as she is to the Parisians), the valor of the soldier Phoebus, the perfidy of Frollo's faith-based cruelties.

The "comic" gargoyles from the movie, dropped from the German and San Diego versions, are here in full force (far more than the three from the movie), and give Quasimodo the opportunity to actually speak without his normal speech defect. But fate has a way of treating kindness with cruelty, and heroes are soon wounded, lovers are parted, betrayals are unleashed, and, well, *{Sad outcome deleted by the Spoiler Police, but anyone who has read the book knows what's coming, up to and including that vivid and heartbreaking image of two crumbling skeletons}*.

It would be easy to dismiss the songs as Alan Menken's weakest score (and, indeed, that was my least favorite part of the original movie), but, it is a score that improves upon reflection, with its character-based leitmotifs, its passion-filled solo moments, its comic and energetic gypsy digressions, and its plainsong pastiches that set the mood. You may not leave the theatre humming "The Bells of Notre Dame" (though I may have), but I, for one, want to hear the score again. And maybe again.

This is a truly spectacular production, with a set (by Shannon Robert) that soars beyond the roof of the theatre, with its enormous bells that are in perfect synch with the deafening gongs. Alan Yeong's costumes gleefully evoke the differing sensibilities of churchmen, soldiers, peasants, and gypsies. Maria Christina Fusté's lights use the theatre's vast inventory of instruments to create a darkly bright environment, a shadowy cathedral, a earthy camp, a flesh-searing fire, and most remarkable - a full-stage Rose Window. Ann-Carol Pence's Music Direction brings these songs to fruition, blending many voices (the program lists a 20-voice ensemble) with a flawless orchestra.

But it's director Justin Anderson and his incredible cast that are the true heroes here. Haden Rider as Quasimodo is simply spectacular, juggling the voice-defect interaction scenes with the full-and-clear singing in his solitary moments, all the while creating a physically demanding character who comes to full-figured life before our eyes. Julissa Sabino is a beautiful and kind-hearted Esmeralda, easily accepted as the "object of lust/affection/friendship" of everyone she meets. David de Vries is excellent as the cruel and haunted Frollo, making him a much more than a stock "bad guy." Lowrey Brown and Kevin Harry are also very VERY good as the stalwart Phoebus and the Frolicsome Clopin.

To be honest, I found the gargoyle puppets a bit irritating, and contrary to the dramatic mood of the piece as a whole. They never came "alive" for me -- they were always just props carried by ensemble members -- and their "let Quasimodo be himself" function could have been met by a single, better-realized gargoyle. Still, they weren't a "fatal distraction," and their scenes were blissfully short.

Still, this is a large and sprawling story, much deeper than the animated movie, much more moving than I expected, and filled to the Bell Tower with extravagant Stage Spectacle and Insane Talent. Let this be my version of pealing all the bells of Metro Atlanta to celebrate the arrival of another Aurora Masterpiece.

-- Brad Rudy (BKRudy@aol.com @bk_rudy #AuroraTheatre #Hunchback)

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