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BWW Review: THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME at Aurora Theatre And Theatrical Outfit



by Amy Zipperer Jul. 21, 2017





Left to Right: **David de Vries** and **Julissa Sabino**

Photo by Daniel Parvis

When Aurora Theatre announced that its 22nd season would open with a production of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, a production offered in partnership with Theatrical Outfit, screams of giddy delight could be heard in the Broadway-themed living rooms of theatre nerds all across Atlanta. The 2014 tuner, showcasing the only collaboration between musical theatre legends **Alan Menken** and **Stephen Schwartz**, seemed destined for Broadway, but, despite the mostly favorable reviews coming out of its premiere at the **La Jolla Playhouse** and its subsequent transfer to the Papermill Playhouse, a prime destination for shows on the Broadway fast-track, the production just never made it to the Great White Way. Given that disappointing history, it's safe to say that theatergoers' appetites have been whetted for regional premieres of this highly-anticipated musical, and this powerful production, with Justin Anderson at the helm, definitely satisfies those cravings.



Haden Rider

Photo by Daniel Parvis

The Hunchback of Notre Dame, loosely adapted from **Victor Hugo's** classic novel of the same name, tells the story of an outcast named Quasimodo who, because of his misshapen spine and ugly face, is relegated to the bell tower of Notre Dame Cathedral by his uncle, Dom Claude Frollo, the powerful

Archdeacon of Notre Dame. Alone in his bell tower, Quasimodo tempers his feelings of isolation by indulging in fantasies that the cathedral's stone gargoyles are living beings and by fantasizing that he will be able to attend the Feast of Fools, the one day of the year when gypsies are allowed to dance in the streets. When his uncle announces that the next Feast of Fools is to be the last, Quasimodo pays no heed to his uncle's warnings that the cruel world is no place for him and ventures out into the streets of Paris to join in the celebration. When Quasimodo becomes the object of ridicule, just as his uncle has predicted that he will, a beautiful gypsy named Esmerelda comes to his rescue, unknowingly making herself vulnerable to Frollo's hatred for gypsies and his repressed sexual desires.

Justin Anderson's staging is splendid. Anderson creates an environment where we acutely feel both the oppressiveness and the divinity of the cathedral, and, in his gypsy street scenes, he effectively captures the energy of a marginalized people who have persevered despite great challenges. His brilliant set, designed by Shannon Roberts, is a huge selling point for this production. With its interesting juxtaposition between simple things like heavy, unhewn wood and ornate details like extraordinary stone statues and stained glass panels, the set provides an important service here: it helps us to find the beauty in the choral music that could seem heavy and overdone in the hands of less visionary direction. Anderson's staging also owes a great debt to Alan Yeong's breathtakingly detailed costume design, which presents a veritable feast for the eyes. His use of richly colored and patterned fabrics, mismashed together to create the world of the gypsy outcasts, is in stark contrast to the pale blue of the congregants' robes and the heavy velvets and stark whites of Frollo's wardrobe, helping us to understand the great insurmountable divide between the church and the gypsy outcasts. The only minor staging distraction comes in Anderson's decision to use puppet-type sculptures as Quasimodo's band of gargoyle friends. While the concept is interesting, the puppets don't always move as nimbly as they should. Some are on wheels that squeak. Some have removable parts that don't quite end up where they are want to be. The scenes that push the gargoyles out of the periphery feel a little unpolished, and this leaves one yearning for a human gargoyle ensemble, especially when one of the saint statues tucked away high up in a dusty nook of Notre Dame, suddenly moves forward in his silvery stone costuming and begins to sing, and we get a glimpse of how very magical stone-humans can be.





Julissa Sabino

Photo by Daniel Parvis

The gorgeous staging is backed by an equally inspired cast. **Haden Rider**, fresh off of his impressive turn as Jesus in Atlanta Lyric Theatre's recent production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, shines again on the Aurora Theatre stage, but this time he has better material to back him up. He does a fine job of stepping from one of the ensemble of narrator-congregants at Notre Dame into the role of Quasimodo by contorting his face and adopting a suitably repellant voice and walk, a big challenge for Rider, given that his face is anything but ugly. Luckily, Rider drops his crafted Quasimodo voice when he sings, presumably because Quasimodo's heart, the thing from which the music springs, is pure and beautiful. And there are few more equipped than Rider to showcase that purity and beauty in song. **Julissa Sabino** is also up to her task, delivering a noteworthy performance as Esmerelda. Her singing is rapturous, and her likeability draws from us the empathy we need to make connections in those few unfortunate moments when the book falls flat. **David de Vries**, in his turn as Dom Calude Frolo, offers up a nicely nuanced performance, helping us to understand the sophisticated internal struggles of his character with relative ease. The talented principal actors are backed by an equally talented ensemble of actors who dance, perform impressive acrobatics, and sing with considerable skill.

In another fruitful partnership, Aurora Theatre and Theatrical Outfit have both gotten their respective 2017-2018 seasons off with a resounding bang. Their production of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* showcases how very much professional theatre in Atlanta has to offer. And if this production is any indication of what's to come, they're both headed for firecracker seasons.

The production runs at Aurora Theatre through August 27 and again at the Rialto Center for the Arts from September 7-17.

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