

## *Les Miserables*

**By Victor Hugo, Alain Boubil, Claude-Michel Schonberg,  
Jean-Marc Natel and  
Herbert Kretzman  
At the Hippodrome Theatre through March 6**

**By Abby Salazar**

### **ANYTHING BUT MISERABLE**

How would you change your life if you were given the opportunity to start over? Would you take revenge on those who made your life miserable, or would you devote yourself to building a completely new character for yourself, forgetting everything about your past? Jean Valjean, prisoner 24601, asks himself these questions in the new stage musical at the Hippodrome Theatre based on Victor Hugo's novel, "Les Miserables." Set in France during the 1800s, it explores the world of second chances through the story of an ex-convict's new life as depicted through powerful sonic effects and exemplary visuals.

"Starting over" is a familiar phrase. Many times we regret things we've done and wish we could start over, but how can we erase things that have already happened? How often do we actually start over? Valjean has made terrible mistakes, but when he is presented with the opportunity to start over, he acts decisively. He not only changes his appearance, name and location but also his values, morals and attitude. He keeps his past to himself and completely alters his outlook on life. The writers of the show emphasize his development by making connections to his past yet giving space for him to act differently according to his new persona.

In the opening scene, a group of men are working hard on a slave ship. Andreane Neofitou, the costume designer, makes distinctions in social status through the clothes the actors wear. The prisoners are dressed in ragged clothing to show their inferiority to the policemen dressed in clean, purple uniforms. The policemen sternly monitor them as though they are soldiers in training. Every now and then a "Whip!" can be heard as a policeman hits a prisoner for slacking off. Amongst those dressed in purple is Javert, who calls on prisoner 24601, a man known for his extraordinary strength, to release him on parole.

As an ex-convict, Valjean is rejected by most in the community. Though aware of Valjean's reputation, the local bishop welcomes him into his home with open arms. Nonetheless, Valjean steals silver from his benefactor and flees the scene. When the police take him back, the forgiving bishop claims that the accused thief is really an honest man. He turns to Valjean and gives him more silver and a valuable piece of advice: start a new life.

In his musical soliloquy, "What Have I Done?" Valjean decides that he would no longer be Jean Valjean, prisoner 24601. This indicates the turning point of his life because through the bishop, the man who "touched my soul and taught me how to love," he reevaluates his life. He asks himself why he "became a thief in the night, became a dog on the run." The regret in his voice is heard, but he decides to follow the bishop's advice. "Jean Valjean is nothing now!" he says, "Another story must begin!" and tears up his yellow ticket-of-leave to symbolize breaking out of his old character in order to start anew.

Eight years later, the man who was once a criminal is now the mayor of Montreuil-Ser-Mer. The man who once stumbled in rags now walks with poise in tailored suits through the factory he owns. The man who once staggered the streets as a thief is now a compassionate man who deliberately goes out of his way to help others.

When he uses his extraordinary strength to help a man stuck under a cart, Javert recognizes the brute force of prisoner 24601. But it's impossible for Valjean to be the same prisoner 24601 he has been searching for all these years – prisoner 24601 has already been arrested. Valjean realizes that an innocent man is about to suffer the consequences of his own actions. The old Valjean might have seen this as a convenient opportunity; he would no longer need to hide from those who seek prisoner 24601. But the new Valjean is not the same man as prisoner 24601. He decides to be the

honest man he aspires to be and confesses his true identity in his divulging soliloquy, "Who Am I?"

Meanwhile, Fantine, a local prostitute, falls ill in her hospital bed. Her frailty is heard in her weak voice as she and Valjean sing "Fantine's Death." Her final wish is for Valjean to care for her illegitimate child, Cosette. At this point, Valjean has his own problems to worry about. For instance, Javert is determined to arrest him after he confesses his true identity.

While the old Valjean would have prioritized his own problem, he agrees to take Cosette from the Thenardiers, the innkeepers who raised her while her mother worked, and raise her as his own. He is determined to help a woman he barely knew, and this shows that he is determined to continue to be the changed man that he is. After he pays the innkeepers a price for her, he flees to Paris with the child. Although Valjean has lived in solitude for a long period of time, Cosette becomes the greatest treasure of his life.

The flaws of show are not enough to weigh down the overall success. There is room for improvement in terms of body language. The fight between Fantine and another factory worker seems too staged due to the lack of proper timing. During many of the scenes that depict the streets of France, a lot of the characters are out of place. The awkward placement of the actors makes it seem like they are in an acting workshop presenting a tableau.

Fortunately, the breathtaking audio and mind-blowing visuals complement the performance. The actors project great and powerful voices that cause energy to radiate throughout the theater. The story is told without any spoken dialogue, and this evokes stronger emotions from the audience. The music allows the lyrics to flow through the audience, and the artistic prose depicts a more vivid imagery. The type of music also defines the emotions the characters feel.

For example, Eponine's "On My Own" is a soliloquy, and the mellow tune in her voice further hints at a sense of loneliness. In contrast, the choreography and the beat of "Beggars at the Feast" give off a more positive and festive mood. Lines such as "Ain't it a laugh, ain't it a treat?" and the Thenardiers stumbling across the stage portray a more humorous atmosphere. Sound designer Mick Potter further intensifies the feel of the show. During the attack at the barricade, variations of sounds that range from loud cannons to striking bullets make the scene sound very realistic.

Set designer Matt Kinley transports the audience from the Hippodrome Theatre to the France of the early 1800s through projections inspired by Hugo's paintings. The most prominent scene is Javert's suicide. After the battle at the barricade, Valjean, Marius and Javert are the last survivors. Valjean has the opportunity to kill Javert and set himself free, but, being the changed man that he is, he decides not to. He begs Javert for more time to take Marius to the doctor. While he is away, Javert contemplates Valjean's merciful deed despite the policeman's many attempts to put the ex-convict behind bars and realizes how wrong he has been.

Many will claim that a complex plot with no spoken dialogue cannot be comprehensible; however, the cast and crew of "Les Miserables" disprove this assumption. The actors successfully tell the story of second chances through lyrics that narrate what is going on and music that enhances the feel by evoking more emotion. Jean Valjean transforms himself from a thief stealing bread to an honest man accepting the consequences of his wrongdoings. The moving themes, intriguing character developments and striking sonic and visual effects contribute to the success of "Les Miserables," a musical that will leave you absolutely breathless.

## **By Anisa Bailey**

### **REDEMPTION FOR "LES MISÉRABLES"**

The convict forced to be an outcast, the mother giving up everything to provide for her sickly child and the daughter being raised by miscreants in the rough streets of France. These are the people the audience is introduced to within the first few scenes of "Les Miserables." Directors Laurence Connor and James Powell have fashioned a production of "Les Miserables" at the Hippodrome Theatre that embodies the original passion of the popular Broadway musical. Set in early 1800's France, "Les Miserables" consists solely of sung dialogue and, minus a few flaws, delivers a storyline that should please most tastes. This show is sure to give the audience some romance, tragedy and a little action with the lingering themes of despair and redemption throughout each aspect of it.

From beginning to end, the characters in this show yearn to have better lives and overcome established hardships. Most of the ensemble is dressed in tattered and unkempt clothing, showing their stories and struggles in their appearance. In most of the ensemble scenes, the lighting is very gloomy and dim. In one particular scene the main character is hoping to find a place where he fits in, while trying to overcome his convict status. Each town that he enters has working people, who are obviously unhappy with his arrival and quick to express it.

The show opens with booming drums and enticing light effects portraying astonishingly realistic waves crashing against a boat. The rowers of this boat are convicts who sing their struggles through the song, "Look Down." The ensemble obviously hosts a strong group of singers, who with every word fill your heart with their sorrows. This is where we meet the leading man, Jean Valjean (Lawrence Clayton), identified only as convict 24601 who was arrested years ago for stealing a loaf of bread.

Valjean is given his yellow ticket of leave by Javert (Andrew Varela) who warns Valjean that he will soon return to prison. This unclear exchange of words would lead one to think that Valjean was now a free man, but Valjean is only on parole and is forced to flash his yellow ticket to the officials wherever he travels. This ticket proves to be a symbol of his past, declaring himself to be a criminal wherever he goes.

Valjean becomes desperate enough to steal from the town's bishop, whose soothing, forgiving voice keeps Valjean from returning to prison and encourages him to change his ways. Clayton exposes his true talent at this moment as he sings directly to the audience about his decision to seek a new beginning. Through all of Clayton's songs, it's apparent that not only is he a strong actor but also that his expansive baritone voice can fill the Hippodrome Theatre with a passion that can move the most insensitive person.

The musical's transitions prove a setback, as the musical's plot jumps over large amounts of time. Though the intention is not to confuse the audience, fast forwarding through many years is not easy to follow. In the matter of 10 seconds the show moves from Valjean's declaration of a new beginning to eight years later, when he is now the mayor and factory owner under the alias of Monsieur Madeleine. Though confusing, the progression of the show is nothing but a speed bump on this intriguing journey.

We meet Fantine (Betsy Morgan), a woman desperate to make money for her sickly daughter at any costs. She is forced to sell her necklace, her hair and even her body to make money. This scene is filled with scantily dressed women being thrown on and off stage by their "customers." After a fight with a potential "customer" Fantine is left battered in the streets and is saved by Valjean, who orders for her to be taken to the hospital.

On her death bed, Fantine begs Valjean to care for her young daughter, Cosette. The desperation in Fantine's voice fills the hearts of the audience with a mother's struggle and the love that she has for her child. One cannot help but be in awe of Fantine's faith that this stranger would take care of her daughter.

After another fast forward, we are introduced to young Cosette whose sweet voice contradicts the brutal treatment she receives from her caretakers, the Thenardiers, who run a bar in the slums of France. Her youthful aura is pummeled by the constant labor and unfair treatment forced upon her by her guardians. They are quick to give young Cosette to Valjean for the right price. The fact that they were willing to give away this sweet child proves that desperation due to the need to survive lurk beneath this scene.

Though the Thenardiers are not the strongest singers of the show, their comic edge adds an original spin to an otherwise serious musical. The Thenardiers own a dump of an inn where the common customers are the poor. During their solo "The Innkeepers Song" drunken people and frisky couples inhabit the inn. Mrs. Thenardier is the epitome of poor service as she waits on customers she isn't too fond of. Mr. Thenardier is not much better as he openly calls his customers "crooks" and considers himself the "keeper of the zoo." Their antics are obviously intended for an adults-only audience and they are able to provoke a few chuckles throughout the crowd. Whenever they are present onstage, their corny punch lines and upbeat music lighten the overall somberness of "Les Miserables."

The show quickly proceeds to nine years later, where the beggars tell the audience what the slums entail. Throughout their stories, the poor people proclaim their desire for equality and redemption. Their woeful melodies are moving as one could actually feel the desire for the poor to prosper. The beggars were so aware of their misfortune that their desire seemed persistent, aggressive and inspirational. They let it be known that they shall overcome and leave behind their life of despair.

In the midst of this corrupt town, a much older Cosette finds "love at first sight" with Marius, a student who is heavily involved in the town's politics. His longtime friend Eponine, the Thenardiers' daughter, turns his sudden infatuation into a love triangle though Cosette and Marius are both unaware of Eponine's feelings.

Eponine is forced to play the middle man as she transports love letters from Marius to Cosette while he is at war for the rights of his people. Marius's obliviousness about Eponine's feelings leave her rejected and upset about not being his first choice, but it's clear that she is used to disappointment. Her clothes are quite frumpy and old in contrast to Cosette, whose clothing is up-to-date and fitting for her slightly higher status.

Eponine, Marius and Cosette sing a love song together where each is given a solo. Unfortunately, the vocals of Cosette and Eponine, played by Jenny Latimer and Chasten Harmon, fall unfathomably flat compared to the engaging voice of Marius. His love-struck tone gives the audience a sense of emotion, whereas Harmon's voice did not suit her character's feeling of rejection.

The show continues with the feeling of despair and redemption, which is evident through the battle scene where Marius is involved. The students of Paris have built an obviously weak barricade made of chairs, table, etc. Their motive for battle is sparked by news of the General's death, the only man who offered the poor hope of prosperity.

The lighting and sound evoke gunshots and bombing to give the audience the feeling of being right on the front lines. The battle takes place on the other side of the barricade, giving the audience the feeling that they are on the same side as the students fighting for their rights. As each student was hit and killed during battle, the feeling of sorrow filled the room, because one couldn't help but feel the men's need for redemption and prosperity.

Valjean enters a street strewn with men who reek of failure and despair. In the midst of this scene, he is able to take the unconscious Marius through the sewers of Paris so that he stays safe. Valjean adds a glimmer of hope that this show desperately needs after that defeated scene. His selflessness in caring for Marius shows that redemption is achievable.

In the end, Valjean spends his last few moments on stage hoping to be forgiven for all he has done and he prays that Cosette will be taken care of. Before his demise, Cosette and Marius come to Valjean and assure him that he is a saint and a selfless man. He is even told by a heavenly Fantine that his deeds are appreciated and he will be forever cherished for that. He has come full circle from despair to redemption.

Valjean's character alone shows us that good deeds and people can surpass the past and enlighten the future. This show proves that acceptance of the past and progress made from then will amount in redemption. The messages in "Les Miserables" prove that whether in the 18th or 21st century, possibilities are timeless.

## **By Carson Ziegler**

### **POWERFUL VERSUS TOO POWERFUL**

The Hippodrome's orchestra sets "Les Miserables" off on its fantastical journey with drawn-out percussion that gives off the feeling of being aboard a sailing ship. The projected graphics add waves to the unfolding first scene, giving the illusion of the sea licking at the sides of the ship, but the music alone is enough to carry one away. From the violent, intense scenes to the melancholy and mournful ones, the orchestra provides the proper tone to every situation.

At times, however, the orchestra's strength outweighs another key element of the musical, the singing, and at other times the singing itself falls prey to unintelligible chorus arrangements. These weaknesses can be overlooked, though, due to the actors' outstanding projection of their characters' feelings. The actors are able to draw one right into their world and see the story through their eyes. Their expression of emotions is so believable, one would come to think these characters real, relatable people.

One of the first songs sung by the newly freed slave, Jean Valjean (Lawrence Clayton), is his soliloquy, where he contemplates his freedom and just what kind of life he can make for himself. Whether to live a life of crime, just scarcely getting by, or to work hard and earn the better life he deserves, this scene decides that fate.

Only portions of his song can be heard, however, as the percussion and brass blare over his emotional scene; from what can be heard of Valjean's lyrics, they would be quite moving, if only all of his soliloquy could be understood. Yet Clayton still pulls the audience into his skin by expressing his insecurities and anxiety, and by making one feel his uncertainty about his destiny.

By contrast, songs like "Who Am I?" utilize the orchestra's strength to pour in just the right amount of gushing sorrow and confusion. At moments like this, when Valjean is at his lowest, the right accompaniment of instruments can instill the perfect feelings. Soft melodies from the violins and pianos waft through the air as Valjean whispers his insecurities; the effect is simply breathtaking. An audience can understand him on both a simple and complex level; the sadness Valjean feels can be read on his face, while his more complicated doubts about the future can be deciphered from the trembling in his voice. Is he is ready for that challenge, he asks himself in the melody; is he ready to make a decent man out of himself?

As awe-inspiring the factory workers' singing and acting may be, the main dilemma in performing "At the End of the Day" is singing in unison. The song is all about the workers communicating their frustration towards an inefficient

worker. The factory workers ran into each other on lyrics, tending to be just a split second slower or faster than their sister workers. This made all the difference; their chorus was a jumbled mess. As beautiful as each girl sounds, not one line can be heard when they are singing together.

The frustration of the other workers is clearly communicated to the audience by their body language as they aggressively push, shove and beat the now unemployed woman, Fantine. Her pain and suffering begins at the factory and only worsens thereafter. She enters the show as a beautiful young woman, and as time goes on, becomes a worn, beaten, dirty woman of the streets.

The musical follows the trials and tribulations of various citizens of France during the early 19th century. One of the key characters, Valjean, after having crawled his way out of poverty and having risen through society's ranks to become a mayor, comes across Fantine (Betsy Morgan). He assures the local police she needs medical attention first and foremost and takes her into his care at the nearest hospital. There she reveals to him she has a daughter, Cosette, whom she wishes to support. It is before her death that Valjean promises to take Cosette as his own daughter.

The story then jumps to the future, when Cosette has reached her adolescent years, and she soon meets Marius, one day traveling the streets. The two believe it is love at first sight, and Marius pleads to his best friend Eponine (Chasten Harmon) to find out just who this beautiful stranger is. This relationship becomes complicated, though, by the fact that Eponine is in love with Marius, creating a love triangle amongst the young adults.

As the three's chemistry mixes and further evolves, they are soon thrown into the rebellion against the French Government. Around this time, Valjean's past comes back to haunt him in the form of an officer, Javert (Andrew Varela), who once sought for the capture of this renowned, rogue slave, Valjean. The protagonists' problems only worsen as the musical proceeds.

In a soliloquy after the rebels' battle at the blockade, one character commits suicide by jumping from a bridge and plummeting to a murky doom. What was truly notable about this scene was how the bridge broke away quickly as the background and surroundings disappeared, turning a short plunge into a free fall into a watery abyss. Even though this happens on a flat stage, the special effects of vivid projections and hidden cables creates a brilliantly morbid scene.

Without a shadow of a doubt the musical's strong suit is sharing the characters' feelings with the audience. If the beautiful songs, when held properly together, are not enough to pull one into the character's skin, the acting does. From a character getting shot to several getting drunk and having a glorious time, the actors produce conceivable personas that people of any and all ages can understand.

The battle at the blockade is packed full of loss and despair as rebels, friends, fall left and right; it is those that survive that truly make the audience feel the pain, the expressions, the stifling of tears as they speak of fallen allies, not only makes one feel sympathy, but feel a sense of familiarity to their sadness as well.

One of the most memorable songs is the catchy "Master of the House" sung by Thenardier, his wife and all their customers. The couple makes such an outrageous team that they become the kind of villains you love to hate. Thenardier's constant drunken stupor, stumbling about the stage and his wife's ever present animosity towards him makes for an entertaining relationship. The two are reoccurring characters whom constantly cause trouble in some way to our 'heroes.' Their not-so-appealing exterior couples well with their equally grotesque, self-inflated interior.

Songs like "The People's Song" also inspires hope and energy, both into other characters involved and the audience, for the battle that lies ahead. The tear-jerking moments are all brought together in a song like "A Little Fall of Rain." This song in particular shares the feelings of both Eponine and Marius, letting each other know how important they are to one another. A pledge of love, a forced goodbye and a dreamily accepting ballad are all tied up in this single song. This kind of deep sadness is the kind an audience can connect to, and any emotional connections bring strength to the show.

"Les Miserables" succeeds much more in bringing the audience into the characters' world than it fails in keeping the musical arrangements clear. Though the music becomes garbled and overpowering at times, the emotions are what shine through in the acting and in some cases the singing. The powerful feeling of misery and loss leaves a mark on the audience. One leaves refreshed and appreciative of life, having seen how miserable the characters' lives are. These characters learn to persevere and gain strength from their suffering; they make the most of the life that is given to them. The show redefines 'miserable,' and for that, it is a must-see production.

## By Emily Braverman

# THE NOT SO MISERABLE ONES

As the theater lights dim, the audience is confronted by a roaring sea splashing about the deck of a slave ship midway to France. What's that? A ship? Where is the quarry in which the original "Les Miserables" began? We will soon see that change is good. The new staging for this classic production brings more life to the original music and characters, keeping it all consistent with the story but adding action and more romance to appeal to all. The minuscule changes add a new quality to the scenes that will appeal to newer audiences without leaving out the "Les Miserables" veterans.

Now at the Hippodrome Theatre, the 25th anniversary production of "Les Miserables" fills audiences' hearts with bittersweet elation. Bittersweet because the audience is tormented by loving a character, then hating that character, and now watching that character suffer through loss of some sort—all this occurring through songs that make our ears tingle.

From the first note that the orchestra plays to the final hum of the violin, it is the score that carries the entire production from start to finish. With all the dialogue being sung, the accompanying music is what gets the audience through. Without the symphonic melodies, the three-hour production would leave audiences heavily bored, for it is the music itself that lightens all moods.

Most would not expect a scene involving a slave ship to create a mystical aura for a show, but despite the flailing whips and the roaring waves the production is able to strike a hopeful tone. Perhaps it's the music that gives us faith. Perhaps it's the quick transition into a scene involving an inspiring bishop. Without learning our main character Jean Valjean's past, we would never understand the future of this show. Now we know that he comes from a slave ship and we can now know that he will only progress in society. It's the sound of the orchestra tuning up their weapons. All these factors set the tragic tone for the rest of the show.

The backdrop displays rolling waves and the audience clenches at their arm rests in fear of going overboard with the captives. That is where our story takes off. From the ship the audience follows Valjean into the town of Digne, France, where he burglarizes a bishop only to get caught by the angered townspeople. The bishop clears up the confusion as he claims that what Valjean has stolen are just gifts.

Such kindness changes Valjean's perspective and he convinces himself to be a better man. The story travels eight years into the future where a successful Valjean takes on the responsibility of raising a deceased factory worker's daughter, Cosette, who has been living with the scamming Thenardiers who own the inn in Montfermeil. Eventually this leads the audience into the main plot of the production as Cosette falls into a love triangle as rebellions occur throughout the country's towns.

The song "At The End Of The Day" is what really kicks off the show as it begins showing the heavy and damaging lives of women living through early 19th century France. As depressing as their jobs as prostitutes are, the audience manages to find that humorous moment as the music chirps and one bimbo rolls across the stage making some flirtatious and hilarious gesture.

The story of "Les Miserables" cannot be thought of as just the tale of a lost soul in an uprising after the French Revolution. It is, more importantly, the love triangle between the adopted daughter of an escaped convict-turned-hero, her love-at-first-sight aficionado and his childhood gal pal. In previous productions this triangle was merely used for time filling whenever the citizen uprisings were on momentary hiatus. That isn't the case 25 years after the original staging.

It is only after the romantic triangle arrives well after the start of the show that we see the show for what it really is: a love story. After the audience meets Little Cosette (Katherine Forrester) 10 years prior to the triangle's forming, we now meet a grown-up Cosette (Jenny Latimer) as she reunites with Eponine (Chasten Harmon), the Thenardiers' daughter. Cosette falls in love with Marius (Justin Scott Brown).

The love triangle seems to be put on the back burner whenever the Thenardiers are onstage. The casting for the entire Thenardier family has to be this production's best move (with the exception of the ditzy, light music to accompany their presence). With the strongest of voices, Harmon sings Eponine's ballad and the show's most popular tune "On My Own." Wearing her battered clothing and using her grand hand gestures, Eponine sings this song to express her love for Marius.

She tells how she dreams of a life with him, but how this dream is just that: a dream. While the daughter of the show's comedians doesn't receive any funny moments and in fact sacrifices her life and love for Marius, Harmon's mastery of

her character makes Eponine the easiest to love. Unlike her easy-to-hate parents, Eponine is independent, rough and tough, making it easy for the audience to root for her to win Marius' affection.

Not even Eponine's tragic love song can keep the audience from wiggling and resisting the urge to clap during the innkeepers' leading song. The stage jumps to life with the production's most fun spirited and joyful song, "Master of the House," sung by Thenardier (Michael Kostroff of HBO's "The Wire") and Madame Thenardier (Shawna M. Hamic). This number has the audience laughing at the innkeepers who are the only source of comic relief in the production. To say these two roles "steal" the show would be an understatement. Accompanied by the orchestra, this song is to "Les Miserables" what "Gaston" is to "Beauty and the Beast."

What exactly makes them the show-stealers? During a gigantic wedding event, the Thenardiers can hardly be forgotten as they attend in bright, obnoxious attire, stealing the dinnerware like the scammers they are. Everybody loves to remember the flirtatious, big-boned villainess and her dopey, crooked-toothed partner. These two are drilled into your head as the audience bounces on their toes as the music becomes light and catchy to match their gleaming personalities onstage.

The set includes not only the old French buildings built into the Hippodrome stage but also the high-tech backdrop—a giant screen working with a projector. The projector is very versatile as it saves the stage crew time from building more set pieces along with the projector being able to create cool scenery. Normally scenes are restricted to the sets in which they take place; with the innovative projector, however, the sets are able to move around the stage like actors.

As the citizens march along the partisan streets, the projected flanking buildings roll in the opposite direction. This trick is also used to take the audience down through the city's sewage system as well as giving viewers a chance to fly through the air as we watch one character plunge to his death. This innovative backdrop does not take away from classic qualities of the show by adding technology that takes away from the historical element. Instead the projector brings the stage more to life as the audience feels they are really traveling with the show.

As the performance begins to round itself off to the end, a climactic battle scene between the town members and the French police leaves most of the town's males dead. Soon Thenardier enters the stage once again to pick-pocket from the deceased. It's too hard to take the moment seriously as he continues burglarizing everyone around him. He sings "Dog Eats Dog," a song in which Thénardier tries to convince the audience (and himself) that times are rough and he's "gotta" do what he's "gotta" do.

So yes, dog eats dog and Thenardier lives instead of those who bothered fighting for his town. Kostroff plays the joker-like character so wonderfully that none of the audience is able to wish him off the stage. His character is always around for some light, comedic relief when the show begins to get heavy. Perhaps it's the chirping of the flute that lightens the scenes but the sound of the classic songs brings joy to audiences' faces even if the song sings about death or loss of love.

"Les Miserables" is not about which side of the French rebellion won. It isn't about whether Valjean is good or bad. It isn't even about the life of the scamming innkeepers no matter how much we want it to be. The production is about connecting all generations with the classic French novel-turned staged opera, making the audience fall in love with the painstaking characters and letting the story never die through the never-edited songs.

Changes in set are added to this special production of the show only to better the audience's knowledge of where their characters really are, but the show thrives on its music. This 25th anniversary produces this feeling of love and enjoyment through the wonderfully orchestrated score of the musical. Hats off to those musicians down in the pit; they play the entire three-hour duration of the classic story and truly are what draws audiences old and new to come back for another showing of "Les Miserables."

## **By Erin Patterson**

### **ENSEMBLE OUTSHINES LEADS**

The Hippodrome Theatre audience rises, applauding feverishly their favorite leads as they take their bow. Some try to duck out early so as to not get caught in the post-show traffic. Others remain stubbornly seated. The cast bows one last time and disappear into the wings. The audience then rushes out commenting on the powerful production of "Les Miserables" that they just witnessed. The production leaves the astute viewer ultimately unsatisfied due to the

miscasting of the lead parts. However, the overall show succeeds because of the extraordinary ensemble.

The cast that supports the leads is often overlooked, yet they often save a production from weakness in the leads. That's because the ensemble can create a mood in the audience more powerfully than any one person. An ensemble has a blend of different voices and characters that add to the whole show, as opposed to just one song. Many shows have excellent leads, but hardly any have excellent ensembles. Therefore, when an ensemble is outstanding it strikes the audience as unusual and makes the show a success.

"Les Miserables" is a musical based on the French novel by Victor Hugo and revolves around Jean Valjean (Lawrence Clayton). An ex-convict who has served his time, Valjean becomes mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer under the new name of Monsieur Madeleine. Clayton is undeniably a strong singer and a talented actor and therefore wins over the audience as a successful performer. Yet, throughout the show when more of his gospel and soulful voice fills audience ears, one realizes that he seems very wrong for the part.

Valjean must be played by an actor with good classical training to be successful in "Les Miserables," and Clayton has obviously not had such. The music in this particular show requires a full voice that can fill the auditorium with warmth and strength because "Les Miserables" is operatic. When Clayton sings "Bring Him Home," the song is awkward instead of touching. Valjean is surrounded by rebellious students and citizens while they sleep, and he sings a song that should be gentle and soft. Instead the audience is greeted with a soulful voice that has a coarse edge. Such a voice cannot express what the character is feeling correctly because one focuses more on when to say "Amen, brother. Amen."

To have an actor, no matter how talented, who is wrong for a leading role means that everyone else in the cast has to work harder. This being said, Clayton does have some touching moments. When he is alone on stage performing a soliloquy, he grabs the audience's attention. Despite his strong solos, Claytons' voice is not enough to offset his awkward moments.

One day a fight breaks out between two women in Valjean's factory because Fantine (Betsy Morgan) has been discovered sending money to her illegitimate child. She is then fired from her job, so she sings about her broken dreams. Morgan tries to belt out the notes of "I Dreamed a Dream," making the song seem aggressive and the character mad. Fantine is a hurt girl, and her voice needs to be powerful yet soft as opposed to hostile.

Because of this, Morgan's angry approach to "I Dreamed a Dream" seems to come out of nowhere and fails to connect with the audience. When Clayton is alone on the stage, his presence captivates the attention of every audience member, yet when Morgan was in the same situation no one feels the need to watch her. Her voice is good for conveying her pain, especially when Fantine and Valjean sing a duet on her death bed, yet Morgan is ultimately not a strong singer or actor and better fit for ensemble work.

The true stars of the show are those in the ensemble, who are all incredibly strong singers with powerful voices. They create more feeling in "The People's Song" than the leads ever do, because they act while they sing. They declare, "Do you hear the people sing? Singing the song of angry men? It is the music of a people who will never be slaves again!" This is sung with the anger and passion that the students feel because of how they are treated. At this point in the production the students are being riled up by Enjolras to fight against the government against their slavery. They sing "The People's Song" declaring that they will revolt.

There is something about seeing the faces and hearing the civilian voices rise up against the government that gives you goose bumps that no other song can. When the ensemble covers the stage with faces enraged and feet marching to the beat of the music, one can hear and almost feel the despair in the voices of the members. A desperate mood comes off the stage and into the audience, making them feel for every character, especially those without names.

Above all, it is the ensemble that makes one understand the suffering and poverty that went along with the times of the French Revolution. Peasants made up about 85 percent of the population of France, yet they had little money and almost no rights. The ensemble has the presence of those hungry, impoverished and hopeful people. It is this hope that inspires the peasants to fight back and to try to create a better government.

Each ensemble member also has to play many characters. It is difficult to believe that the same women who play street peasants in dirty rags that beg and grope their way across the stage also play the prostitutes in ruffled short skirts that are obviously worn every night and sing "Lovely Ladies" with loud, nasal voices as they attempt to sell themselves for some extra cash.



Then the same actresses play the somber women that scurry off the stage as gunshots pierce their ears. The ensemble creates a mood that reflects what the directors were trying to achieve. It gets to the point in the show where one can't quite make out what words the ensemble is singing, but it doesn't matter. The viewer understands perfectly what is happening because of the passion in each note from every cast member on stage.

Mood is obviously the most important factor in "Les Miserables." The French Revolution was a time when darkness swept over the impoverished areas of France. To evoke this mood so that the audience can understand it, the show has very dim lighting, only enough so that the audience can see what is actually happening on the stage. This makes things on stage appear to be mysterious and dingy which adds another layer of realism and understanding to the complexity of the show.

Ultimately, "Les Miserables" is an unsatisfying show because of the disappointing leads. The lead roles are miscast, and thus the lead performers are not able to fully realize the world that the director creates with the lights and ensemble. If you're looking for a show with a main character that you fall in love with, skip over this tour. However, if you're a lover of a big sound that gives you goose bumps from a group of people, "Les Miserables" demonstrates the importance of the ensemble in any production.

**By Max Spitz**

## **"LES MISERABLES," A NOT SO MISERABLE PRODUCTION**

The odds of an original show succeeding on Broadway or in the West End are extremely small. The odds of this show remaining successful for even a few short years are smaller still. However, "Les Miserables," based on Victor Hugo's novel, has managed to stay popular even now, in its 25th anniversary year. In honor of this rare achievement, Laurence Connor and James Powell have directed a production that pays homage to the show's rich history, but unfortunately does not quite reach its past heights.

Very often a show's name is more than enough to bring crowds in, and directors can work half as hard and still rake in profits. However, those involved in this production of "Les Miz" have in no way slacked, even if not all their ventures are successful. Connor and Powell stage the show with a wonderful flair that deftly follows the musical's emotion and flows along smoothly, streamlining an already three-hour-long show. Regrettably, their direction does not truly embody the show's story; often lines of dialogue or interactions between characters are thrown off and the plot itself seems less important than its actual presentation.

This operatically styled, epic musical spans many years, taking the audience through the trials and tribulations of the saintly yet unlucky man, Jean Valjean. "Les Miz" regularly begins with a depiction of the chain gang Valjean served on for 19 years. However, this version goes back to Hugo's original novel, and shows Valjean as a prisoner on a prison ship, rowing as his punishment.

As the ship's officer Javert releases Valjean on parole, he reminds Valjean that his freedom will be forever stifled by the "yellow ticket of leave," telling all whom he meets of his past. Soon, Valjean realizes the reality in this statement, finding himself penniless and starving in the streets. After being saved and redeemed by a kind priest, Valjean tears up his parole papers and vows to change his identity and his thieving ways along with it.

The story continues as Valjean has in fact made a new life as a factory owner in a French slum, keeping watch over his destitute, vengeful workers and perverted foreman. After one worker, Fantine, is fired because the factory learns of her bastard child she has kept secret at a nearby inn, she finds herself forced into prostitution just to send money to her daughter's greedy keepers, Thénardier and his wife. Having been beaten to the point of death, Fantine begs Valjean to care for her child, Cosette. Valjean vows to do so, and buys the child away from the Thénardiens.

The final leg of the story takes place nine years following this purchase, with a group of university students joining in a revolution against the French government. Valjean and Cosette are caught up in the battle, as Cosette finds herself smitten with one of its leaders, Marius. The show reaches its climax as Marius fights with his fellow students for freedom, and Valjean fights for final redemption from Javert and his past sins.

Visually, this production is truly a spectacle, thanks to Matt Kinley's beautiful set design. Through masterful adaptations of Hugo's own paintings, Kinley has created intricate and vivid sets, none of which spare any detail. The famed barricade fits the scene perfectly, with bits of chairs and tables sticking out from the armaments; it truly looks

as if it was created in the students' moment of crisis and desperation.

Best of all is the animated backdrop, which projects shadowed, haunting images through a scrim. This technology is utilized to a perfect degree, timing effortlessly with the show itself and assisting in expressing passage of time and movement without any feeling of cliché. During the sewer scene, this background moves along seamlessly with the actors, enhancing the atmosphere and showing just how deep Valjean ventures to save Marius.

Unfortunately for Kinley's work, this production's lighting was not nearly as successful. Paule Constable's lighting design consists entirely of small spotlights and specials, never once lighting up the entire stage until the final curtain. While this endeavor works to instill the show's somber mood, it also darkens the stage itself to a ridiculous degree, often leaving speaking characters in black. The sound as well does not live up to professional standards. Actors are often drowned out by the thunderous orchestra, and microphones occasionally cut out entirely, leaving soloists muted on stage.

As the main character and driving force of "Les Miz," Jean Valjean requires strength and energy to embody the show's passion. While not a bad performer in any way, Lawrence Clayton fails to reach the pivotal height needed. Clayton's Valjean seems overly sympathetic, expecting pity from those around him. However, this character's strength comes from his strong self-confidence, something Clayton does not grasp nor display.

When making that pivotal decision to break his parole, Valjean expresses great fear in God and determination. However, this depth is simply missing from Clayton's performance; rather this difficult decision comes across as rote and uninspired. His deep baritone voice is powerful, but lacks the inner intensity and vigor that Valjean expresses. Were this a simple concert production, Clayton would be welcomed. However, when asked to share deep emotional moments with other characters, such as "Fantine's Death" and "In My Life," he simply lacks the connective passion.

Clayton's strongest moments come in Valjean's interactions with Javert (Andrew Varela). Like Clayton, Varela has a strong voice but lacks the depth of character to express Javert's growing obsession with Valjean. However, when the two meet on stage, both characters come alive and the intensity and desperation is suddenly palpable. Varela's strongest moment comes during his solo, "Stars," where he captures Javert's inner, uncontrollable hate for Valjean with quiet strength and builds to a powerful climax.

In a show with few moments for humor, the Thenardiers (Michael Kostroff and Shawna M. Hamic) take their comic roles by storm, creating the show's strongest chemistry. Kostroff plays the greedy, intoxicated innkeeper to a perfect degree, without a hint of overacting. Utilizing the simple additions of a hunched back and gimp foot, Kostroff manages to establish Thenardier's debauchery with ease, exuding pure selfishness and materialistic desire. He embodies the kind of hateful character needed in such a role, to establish himself as the story's villain.

Hindered only by his lack of a strong singing voice, Kostroff overcomes this with impressively subtle acting. His pairing with Hamic only helps to enhance both of their performances. Hamic's range shows off a many-faced Mme. Thénardier, deftly expressing the dishonesty that drives her character. Whether groveling to Javert, bullying the Young Cosette or bargaining with Valjean, Hamic never fails to deliver the hate-inducing falsity expected from the Thenardiers.

Unfortunately for the production as a whole, its strongest performances do not enter until the tail end of the first act. Many a bigger name is upstaged by the sheer power of Jeremy Hays as Enjolras, the revolution's leader. Surrounded by his fellow students, Hays grasps control over the crowded ABC Cafe, and leads them to battle.

A weaker performer would harm this character's believability, but Hays' strength seems truly powerful enough to bring a mob to revolution. Along with this, he has an infallible baritone that unceasingly captivates the listener. His unceasingly strong pitch and vibrato in "The People's Song" fill the theater with desperation as he leads the students to their barricade. In this moment, he brings a city to battle with the sheer power of his voice.

Despite the strength of all these performers, none can rival the brilliant performance from Chasten Harmon as Eponine. As the Thenardier's child, forced to join the people of the streets, Harmon embodies every drastic character change. She portrays her true passion for Marius with flirtatious looks and comments compounded with glances of desperate love and contrasts this with pure fear and strength when defying her father, Thenardier. This multi-faceted character is compounded by a passionately powerful voice, which she shows off in both the powerhouse solo "On My Own" and the deeply beautiful duet "A Little Fall of Rain." In a show full of many strong performers, including a brilliant ensemble, Harmon and Hays seemed to stand high above them all.

To criticize "Les Misérables" is to criticize a show that has been ranked number one on countless lists. After a certain amount of time, it becomes almost taboo to question a show's success. However, in the case of "Les Misérables" there is in fact little to criticize. It takes an intriguing plot line, adds brilliant music and ends with a moral: the formula to a

popular musical. Connor and Powell entertain with their production of “Les Miserables,” even if it does not quite achieve those lofty standards set by its predecessors.

What sets “Les Miz” apart from the leagues of other similar musicals is its timelessness. Despite taking place in the early 1800s, its story, characters and moral all remain relevant to this day. Even now, as revolution sweeps the Middle East, we see the unhappy common man rising against its oppressors once again. “Les Miserables” creates a captivating testament to the power of each man, and his irremovable ability for redemption. In expressing that definition and meaning, Connor and Powell have headed a wonderfully successful production of musical theater.

## **By Sierra Woodson**

### **THE WRETCHED ONES**

While viewing “Les Miserables” at the Hippodrome Theater, one felt like one was participating in the play. When the performers were singing, they were communicating not just with one with one another but with us in the audience as well. And because that dialogue was sung rather than spoken, the words became much more alive. And when the characters rose up against oppression, we felt like we were rebelling as well.

Although, the show had its flaws, it was still successful. One might be distracted by an uncomfortable seat, by the unnecessary profanity dialogue or by the high-pitched voices singing at a rapid pace. Despite these distractions, though, the show pulled the viewers into the story with its entertaining diversion and serious themes.

“Les Miserables,” (“The Miserable Ones”) first appeared as an 1862 French novel by Victor Hugo. The book followed multiple characters over a 17-year period, from 1815 to the 1832 June Rebellion. The characters wore costumes that gave us the impression that we had been taken in a time machine to the French Revolution. Their outfits were mostly made of silk and cotton, consisting of light colors. Even the sound effects such as thunder and lightning added to the realism.

The protagonist, an ex-convict named Jean Valjean, struggled with the law for stealing bread during an economic crisis. Javert, a police inspector dedicated to taking crime off the streets, was obsessed with returning Valjean to prison. By contrast, Bishop Myriel believed that Valjean could become a better person. Valjean proved the bishop right by agreeing to take care of a dying prostitute’s daughter, Cosette.

When the characters communicated with one another, the music resembled opera but was sung a bit softer. This allowed the audience to better comprehend what was being said. Therefore, not only did the performers have to be great actors but excellent singers as well. When someone talks to you, you gain the information but not much feeling, but when someone sings to you, you are better able to determine their emotions. Thus you gain more focus when communicating through song.

Also drawing the viewers in was the actors’ body language. For example, in one scene where the actors were trying to gain citizens’ rights, each actor stood beneath a red, blue or white banner, each representing faith, justice or equality. Thus when the actors shook one another’s hands, their body language told us that they were united in their struggle to create a justice and equal society.

Several songs were unlikable because they relied on profanity and references to drinking, but other songs were quite impressive. One that stood out was “Bring Him Home.” When Valjean sang about a wounded young man, his worry was communicated not only by the lyrics but also by the large arm gestures and mournful face.

In conclusion, this particular musical really prompts deep thought about life. One realizes that loving others, while difficult, is not always a thankless task. Love and compassion are the most important gifts one can give another and that always displaying these qualities should be the most important goal in life. The characters were very affectionate and caring in many scenes. Though set in the 19th century, these lessons apply to our daily life today.

# *Shrek the Musical*

**By David Lindsay-Abaire and Jeanine Tesori  
At the Hippodrome Theatre through April 3**

**By Abby Salazar**

## **LET YOUR FREAK FLAG FLY**

Like other fairytales, “Shrek” appeals to children through its fantasy-like atmosphere; however, it presents a different message from most classic fairytales. This story isn't a typical prince meets princess and they live happily ever after kind of story. In fact, in this story, the prince does not save the princess, nor does he marry her. Children often aspire to be princes or princesses, but they often overlook the less glorified characters such as fairies, gingerbread men and elves. “Shrek the Musical,” presented at the Hippodrome Theatre, focuses less on the royal family and more on these other characters to show that you don't need a crown or tiara to be play a significant role.

This difference allows the show to effectively present the underlying theme of self-acceptance and the importance of not judging a book by its cover while still acknowledging the innocence of the younger audience. Many powerful figures throughout history and literature have presented the harsh truth about how society views those who are different. Adolf Hitler exterminates the Jews because they aren't the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Europeans that he wants everyone to be. Similarly, Dark Lord Voldemort from “Harry Potter” exterminates the wizards who aren't pure-bloods. Instead of depicting the dark and depressing realities of life, the show presents the message through a colorful and vibrant musical.

The childish nature of the production is not as appealing to the older audience, but the music is so vivacious that energy radiates throughout the room. Although it is different from classic fairytales, “Shrek the Musical” appeals to the younger audience through the variety of music and dance with an underlying theme that leaves the audience with a lesson they can apply beyond the theater.

Shrek (Eric Petersen) seems to be a nefarious ogre: big, fat and ugly with an intimidating roar. When they send him away from home, Shrek's parents ensure that he understands the harsh truth about society: people fear what they don't understand. They sing about a “Big Bright Beautiful World,” but don't be fooled by the upbeat music and happy tune. One line changes the whole meaning of the song. “But not for you,” they say, “We're ugly son. That means our lives are harder.”

Shrek's bright green skin, enormous body and appalling stench cause him to be shunned by the rest of Duloc. Everyone fears him the moment they lay their eyes on him, so he accepts the truth that he was taught as a young child and isolates himself in his swamp. Lord Farquaad (David F.M. Vaughn), the current ruler of the kingdom, is a small yet manipulative man who wants a perfect society, so he banishes the fairytale freaks to Shrek's swamp. Shrek is dismayed with this invasion of his privacy, and the creatures aren't pleased with being evicted from their homes just because they are different. Shrek makes a deal with Lord Farquaad that sends him off to a journey that will change his life.

The set intends to transport the audience from the theater into a real-life fairytale book. Unfortunately, the visuals are lacking because it feels more like walking through the suburban streets on Halloween than watching a touring Broadway musical. For instance, when Shrek and Donkey arrive at Farquaad's castle, the backdrop is very unrealistic, and they are greeted by people with plastic hair. Meanwhile, in the swamp, the colors of the fairytale characters' costumes are clashing. Although the flashy set may capture the attention of the children, the older audience will be overwhelmed and find it unappealing.

In order to gain back his swamp, Shrek agrees to help Lord Farquaad who cannot be king without a wife. Lord Farquaad sends Shrek to rescue Princess Fiona (Haven Burton) from the tower protected by a dragon. Shrek takes the blabbermouth Donkey (Alan Mingo, Jr.) dressed in a tight, furry gray suit to guide him through his journey. Throughout the journey, Donkey notices that Shrek closes himself off from others, so he tries to break the wall that distances the ogre from the rest of the world. His silly persistence annoys Shrek to the point that he breaks and explains to Donkey that ogres are like onions because “ogres have layers.” He says that there is more to his character than what is seen on the surface.

While Shrek and Donkey are making their way to the castle where Fiona resides, the princess, glowing with her red hair and elegant green dress, sings an angelic song, "I Know It's Today." The song depicts her innocent hope that today is the day that her prince will rescue her. Shrek successfully makes part of her dream come true; however, when she realizes that he isn't the knight-in-shining-armor that she had in mind, she is extremely disappointed. Shrek thinks that this is simply because he is a fat, ugly ogre. Little does he know that Fiona has a secret of her own: she is an ogre as well. Shrek overhears her confessing this to Donkey, but he assumes that she is talking about him when she mentions how "ugly and princess don't go together." This scene exemplifies how things aren't always what they seem.

Meanwhile, in the swamp, the fairytale creatures are outraged that they have been banished for being freaks. "We're different, so they make us feel like we're freaks... But God makes us special." This is a turning point in the show and presents a significant message. The creatures learn that they need to accept who they are and "let your freak flag fly!" When Shrek discovers the truth about Fiona, he learns this as well. He and Fiona have clearly fallen in love, and their physical appearances will not keep them from being happy.

The show depicts an important message through a family-friendly environment. Throughout his life, Shrek has been judged as a scary and nefarious monster, but "maybe you shouldn't judge me before you get to know me," he says. This emphasizes the importance of not judging a book by its cover because beauty comes from within. This serious message is successfully illustrated through jokes, songs and fairytales. Despite the unfairness that Lord Farquaad has imposed upon them, the fairytale creatures recognize their self-worth and show that although they are different, they can be happy.

## **By Anisa Bailey**

### **"I'M A BELIEVER" IN SHREK**

If families loved "Shrek" the movie, then they will surely enjoy "Shrek the Musical," the song-and-dance version of this timeless comedy now at the Hippodrome Theatre. The musical presentation adds an original spin to the blockbuster movie by giving the audience a stronger connection to the living actors on stage than to the animated characters on the movie screen. This is amplified by audience participation, references to current issues and even pointing out some well known areas in Baltimore. Even though there are some sad moments in the musical, laughs are produced left and right to ensure that the audience will have an enjoyable experience.

The plot follows a swamp-inhabiting ogre named Shrek who is forced to retrieve the deed to his land from Lord Farquaad to rid himself of the refugee fairytale creatures camping there. He is joined by his joke-cracking steed, a donkey, who finds a warm connection with the cold-spirited ogre. Their contrasting personalities show the true meaning of friendship, the importance of being one's self and how attainable a "happily ever after" can be.

The show incorporates an enlightening twist to the well known movie. The audience is first introduced to a seven-year-old Shrek (Danielle Soibelman) and his parents (Brian Gonzales and Carrie Compere). They look like what one would imagine an ogre to be: monstrous green creatures with raggedy clothing and poor hygiene. The parents' cruel warnings remind Shrek that he is an ugly ogre and, as they sing "every dream comes true, but not for you."

Though this sounds harsh, their unusual casualness and funny gestures are sure to get the crowd chuckling. Compere and Gonzales aren't the best singers, but their voices match the matter-of-fact attitudes of the characters. In the movie, we meet an adult Shrek who is obviously unenthused by fairytales, so by adding parents to "Shrek the Musical," the audience can see where he gets his ideas about happy endings.

Shrek moves through the very unrealistic looking woods and passes groups of people who run from him in fear. At first he fails to understand this, because he is such a nice child, but the script writers have done a great job of showing Shrek's transformation from a civil ogre to a rude, intimidating one. It isn't until he is tricked into being put in a bonfire, that he realizes that he might not ever get a "happily ever after" because he's an ogre.

Fortunately, this sad moment is masked by priceless comedy because of young Shrek's naïveté throughout his entire journey. The sad aspect gives the audience a sense of realism, while the comic edge keeps them on their feet and brings the show back to being fun. This proves to be an important aspect to the show so that both children and adults are entertained by the performance.

The audience meets a seven-year-old Fiona (Hayley Feinstein) whose parents tell her that she will be living in a dragon-guarded castle until her prince finds her. Feinstein has a youthfully pleasing voice as she sings about the fairytales that she admires. With the use of a cloud, young Fiona transitions into a teenage Fiona (Sarah Peak) who is still singing about about her "happily ever after."

This could have been a tetchy moment because she is losing hope in ever being found. She is able to divert from that moment by throwing in funny punch lines, like a fairytale marriage needing a “pre-nup.” It lightens the somber feeling and shows that she is capable of finding humor in the situation. We finally transition to an older and final Fiona who after 8,423 days has realized that she is tired of waiting for her prince charming and even jokingly acts as if she would jump from her balcony. All three Fionas come together to harmonize the four words they live by: “I Know It’s Today.”

Young Shrek finds his home in a swamp, represented by a simple, mossy, wooden door, where he makes a transition to the older Shrek (Eric Peterson). From the moment he enters on the stage, Peterson receives uncontrollable laughter (especially from the kids) because of his wedgie-pulling, flatulence-producing antics. While singing his soliloquy, it is obvious that he is merely an average singer. Unfortunately, during the song “Big Bright Beautiful World,” what talent Peterson does have is drowned out by the orchestra.

Problems arise when Shrek finds that his swamp has become the new home for discarded fairytale creatures. These creatures include the Three Little Pigs, a Sugarplum Fairy, Pinocchio, the Wicked Witch, the Big Bad Wolf and many more. They are dropped off on Shrek’s swamp by Lord Farquaad as misfits and in their song “Story of My Life” they sing about how they are not as abnormal as people assume. All they want is to fit in and be treated as so.

Shrek, being the uncaring ogre he is, doesn’t care that they feel rejected; all he wants is for them to leave his swamp. For Shrek to seem so rude and uncaring, his selfish actions make his later heroism seem more dramatic. So, he agrees to find Lord Farquaad in the town of Duloc to reclaim his deed and rid himself of his new “neighbors.”

While reading his map to find his way toward Duloc, where he points out Baltimore’s own Ace of Cakes, Shrek runs into the rambunctious Donkey (Alan Mingo, Jr.) who’s on the run from the guard trying to seize him for being a talking donkey. Donkey, who seems to be the only creature who is unafraid of the ogre, takes a liking to Shrek, though the feeling is not mutual. Against Shrek’s better judgment, he allows Donkey to accompany him to Duloc.

The audience meets Lord Farquaad (David F.M. Vaughn) right before Shrek and Donkey get to him. He is a larger-than-life character who stands at about four feet tall. He is the source of the audience’s laughter because his legs are really Vaughn’s thighs, because Vaughn walks on his knees during the entire performance.

When we meet him, Farquaad is torturing Gingy, the gingerbread man, trying to find who his princess will be. This is when he hears about Princess Fiona who must be rescued from the tower she is being held in. He only needs to marry her so that he can live “happily ever after” as the King of Duloc. When Shrek and Donkey meet Farquaad, he immediately sends them to rescue Fiona in exchange for the deed to Shrek’s swamp.

Through the course of their journey together to rescue Fiona, Shrek and Donkey become unexpectedly close. Shrek reveals that ogres are like onions in that they have layers and people never take the time to find out who they really are. Donkey confesses his need for Shrek’s companionship because he is alone just like Shrek. This relationship is important because it shows that the most unusual people can evolve into great friends. The musical does a great job of portraying the steps to Shrek and Donkey becoming closer.

Shrek is able to save Fiona and defeat the guarding Dragon, who takes a serious liking to the faux-flirting Donkey. When Shrek reveals who he is to Fiona, she is disappointed by her knight in shining armor. Later we find out that she feels this way because she too is an ogre, but only at night. She figures that she must marry Lord Farquaad for “true love’s kiss” and the breaking of her curse.

Shrek and Fiona have a noticeable chemistry as characters and as actors. They become their closest after a belching and flatulence contest that left the kids (and some parents) exploding with laughter. The two follow with flirtatious encounters which Donkey slowly but surely begins to notice. He goes into a song, accompanied by the Three Blind Mice, telling Shrek that he needs to “Make a Move” on Fiona before they reach Duloc. Donkey and his back-up singers definitely shed a comical light on the twisted relationship of Shrek and Fiona.

Right when Shrek is about to confess his love for Fiona, he overhears her talking about “who could love a hideous beast” when in reality she is talking about herself being an ogre. By morning the next day, Shrek summons Lord Farquaad to take Fiona in exchange for the deed. A puzzled Fiona and Donkey are rejected by Shrek when attempting to explain what he heard. Of course, with Farquaad on the stage and the dramatic moment can turn hilarious. He names his carousel horse “Charlie Sheen” because of his uncontrollable neighing and back-up car sirens.

The show continues to add its witty comedy. Like the movie, Shrek wins back the affection of Fiona and the performance ends with the song “I’m a Believer.” “Shrek the Musical” used comedy to show how obtainable a happily

ever after can be in the end. It leaves the audience with some laughs as well as a new insight the unique presentation of “Shrek.”

## **By Carson Ziegler**

### **HEARTFELT TALE WITH A DASH OF HUMOR**

“Shrek” the motion picture was first and foremost a comedy, and the musical version of the show upholds that reputation to a certain degree. From Shrek spraying himself with skunk stink to Fiona singing with a bird at such a high pitch that the bird explodes, the humor ranges from visual gags to snarky comments. However, this production focuses on its characters’ relationships more than their comical chemistry, unlike the motion picture.

“Shrek the Musical” is more about its characters’ interactions with one another and how they express their feelings than the show’s humor. This is not to say the production went on without any laughs, but its humor was not as a predominant factor than it was in the movie version. This may hinder the show’s development as a comedy, but is the key element in making the production its own entity.

A good example of this is the new introduction that has been added to the stage musical. The forest-patterned curtains pull away as the Hippodrome Theatre’s orchestra introduces the opening scene: a wooded swamp and its inhabitants, the ogres. The youngest ogre, Shrek, is forced out of his house at the age of seven by his parents, who believe that is the proper time for little ogres to grow up and experience the “real world,” a world where ogres are hated and feared. During this time it is briefly explained Princess Fiona is cast out by her parents as well; sent away to a dragon-guarded tower, waiting for her Prince Charming to one day arrive.

The scene soon transitions after Shrek’s parents finish singing “Big Bright Beautiful World” and after the group of villagers are scared away by Young Shrek (Danielle Soibelman) and Young Fiona (Hayley Feinstein) moves away. This is when the older Shrek (Eric Petersen) comes in singing his “Story of My Life,” which explains his life in the present and how he decides to live it. He’s a portly, green ogre with ragged clothes living happily in his filth, embracing his stink and the swamp he lives in, shirks his problems with humanity away in an attempt to create his own, better life. The song provides ample character development by giving such characters motive and reason for the way they chose to live their lives. Though the song is quite humorous at times, the audience can sympathize with Young Shrek and Young Fiona’s isolation.

After a herd of fairytale characters is suddenly dropped on his doorstep, because Lord Farquaad (David F.M. Vaughn) has kicked them out of the kingdom of Duloc, Shrek decides to embark on a journey to get his land back. Farquaad promises the deed to Shrek’s swamp on the condition that Shrek rescue Fiona for Farquaad, so Shrek sets out on his quest.

Characters like Donkey (Alan Mingo Jr.) and Shrek remain true to the movie, Donkey soon becomes Shrek’s companion and eventual friend, which is something Shrek is quite unaccustomed to having, leading to awkward, humorous moments. The movie brought various fairytales of old together into a more modernized humor-based story, putting a spin on classic tales by making an ogre the protagonist. Donkey is still pushy, still speaks his mind and still has a happy-go-lucky attitude.

Mingo wears a suit resembling an actual donkey’s legs and scraggily gray hair topped off with the necessary realistic donkey ears to complete the illusion it is in fact Donkey on stage. Shrek stays the anti-social, “layered” ogre that no one really understands. These two really hit it off in Donkey’s first song, “Don’t Let Me Go,” where he explains to Shrek just how much they need each other and eventually gets to begging Shrek not to leave him behind. The song is quite funny, but yet again, the relationship rings out louder than the comic side of the musical.

Characters like Princess Fiona (Haven Burton) also add an extra dimension to their personality through songs that aptly express this new side. Fiona is given a deeper loneliness and desperation than was apparent in the film. Fiona’s first song was “I Know It’s Today,” describing her desire to be rescued by her knight in shining armor since the age of seven, up to the present, where she’s over 20 years old.

It begins with Young Fiona reading the fairytale “Rapunzel,” in search for that “happy ending” she so deeply longs for. She “skips ahead, skips ahead” various times throughout the song to get to the end, bringing a humorous flair to a song that otherwise could have been taken quite seriously. This song really adds that deeper desperation for Fiona to get out of the tower, as the song emphasizes her counting down the days she’s been locked away, today being 4,823.

During Fiona's rescue, Shrek scales the tower while Donkey distracts the dragon, leading to the musical's finest song, "Forever," sung by Dragon (voiced by Carrie Compere) herself. A large puppet of Dragon is brought to life by four puppeteers who masterfully animate her. Both Dragon's voice and her body are synchronized to portray an actual singing and talking dragon. In the film, Dragon is limited to roars and coos; this is a beautiful improvement.

The Dragon Head puppeteer (Denny Paschall) had the hardest task of syncing Dragon's lips with her voice and flicking her eyelids open and closed for emphasis on different notes, but it was accomplished brilliantly. The dragon closes her eyes on the long, drawn out notes, as an actual person would. Dragon was definitely the highlight of the musical's tech department and by far the strongest voice in the entire production. Her song expressed her loneliness in the dungeon, asking why so many knights and princes come to rescue Fiona but no one ever comes to rescue a dragon. The song's humor pulls takes the form of long-imprisoned knights, with beards so outrageously long the audience can assume just how long.

Fiona and Shrek express their inner hurt in "I Think I Got You Beat," where they bicker over who had the worst childhood and who has had the worst life. It's through this song the two realize they aren't so different from each other and grow closer.

As Shrek and Fiona develop feelings for the other, Donkey picks up on the "vibes." This leads Donkey into another entertaining song backed up by the Three Blind Mice, "Make a Move." Donkey sings a catchy tune about how Shrek better make a move on Fiona before it's too late and they reach Duloc; the song is reminiscent of the song "Kiss the Girl" from "The Little Mermaid," only it's jazzier with trumpets and saxophones blasting along with the singing. The orchestra and cast are balanced well in this memorable song. This song-and-dance number brings more humor into the production, keeping the feel of a musical comedy.

The musical's only noticeable weakness is its scenic design; many times the background seems childlike—and not "children's book" childlike but "drawn-by-children" childlike. At times the underdeveloped set take away from the scene; when Shrek and Donkey explore different stretches of forest, the forest appears to be the same as Shrek's swamp. Though the two scenes contain trees, they are quite different environments. Also, different parts of Duloc seemed fairly stark, only displaying a stone wall in the back and a blue sky above. This is, admittedly, a low point in the production, but can be ignored by the cast's ever-infectious humor and catchy songs.

Overall, for a comic musical based on an acclaimed movie, "Shrek the Musical" achieves just that. It is a hilarious musical with similarities to the movie, but different enough to be considered its own entity. It contains enough character development and interactions that the audience can choose favorite characters with proper justification. The musical is more expressive and emotional than the motion picture, and for that, it can be considered a different story altogether.

**By Emily Braverman**

## **TALKING DONKEYS, LUSTRIOUS DRAGONS, SINGING OGRES, OH MY!**

Sleeping Beauty was put into a deep sleep after pricking her finger on a bewitched spindle, only to be awakened by her true love's kiss. Cinderella found her Prince Charming after being dolled up by her fairy godmother. Anastasia discovered her true love was the boy from her childhood. Princess Fiona? The princess by day, ogre by night, finds her true love by challenging him to flatulence and belching contests.

"Shrek the Musical," now at the Hippodrome Theatre, shares a different kind of love story: one with enormous ogres, ballad-singing dragons and jubilant songs. This new fairytale sets the stage for the future of love stories. The idea that all couples fight (even the royal ones), the idea that not everyone is whom they appear to be, and most importantly the idea that not everyone has to be a rich, beautiful princess to be happy are all new variations on the usual romantic plot. But if this new type of fairytale tells stories as persuasively as this production does then it'll be a smooth transition. With songs that mix modern language with classic Renaissance tongue, "Shrek the Musical" will make a big splash in the musical industry by creating a new Renaissance era for audiences.

Take, for example, the opening scene. We meet Shrek, the protagonist, as a seven-year-old ogre being sent away from his family and home out into the "real" world. It's a sad scene to see the poor little green thing wander around and not fit in anywhere because everyone fears him, or wants to eat him after screaming in terror for a few moments. But aside from the Renaissance-themed clothing on the characters' backs is a theme that people today can easily relate to: the difficulty of fitting in. Finding yourself and people who accept you for what you are, that is the modern fairytale.



That's what happens Shrek the Musical."

Audiences familiar with DreamWorks' 2001 film version of "Shrek" are already aware of the plot. This newly adapted musical-theater production takes the animated film and adds some flashy tap dancing and catchy tunes. The musical stays true to the movie by retaining familiar and classic lines and scenes including the infamous "Not my gumdrop buttons!" and Shrek's joke, "Do you think he's maybe compensating for something?" Keeping these lines does nothing but add to the production's appeal. People like the feeling that they can participate in the show by already knowing something that will be said. It doesn't hurt that the lines are hysterical and something audiences will never forget, be it from the musical or movie.

Despite the children populating the Hippodrome audience, "Shrek the Musical" appeals to more than just younger eyes and ears. With a few sexual innuendos worked into the script, not even adult audiences can deny the hilarity of the story that tells the tale of two souls, one a grumpy ogre and one a patient but assertive princess, who meet and fall in love. Of course, the fairytale wouldn't be a love story if there weren't complications along the way. The two, Shrek and Princess Fiona, resent each other after Shrek rescues her because neither believes the other is the expected one true love. But resentment is a not uncommon theme in modern love stories. People don't just fall in love these days; they have to work through thick and thin to find that person who can tolerate them just as much as they can tolerate the other. Little does Fiona know that this true love is just about to find her.

The production excels in costume design, music and lyrics, choreography and especially casting. There isn't much the show doesn't do extra well aside from casting their number-one lead male. Eric Petersen, who plays Shrek, also represents the biggest letdown in the production. For the man that played this same role on Broadway, his portrayal isn't convincing in the least. While it can't be all that easy to play a mean, green monster, the mean and green part give the actor at least somewhere to start.

Petersen plays the supposed monster as someone too friendly. The character's personality is far too jolly and from the look on his face, Peterson's Shrek seems to be smiling all too much. As far as his accent goes, Irish, English or ogre, it all sounds fake and annoying for the entire show.

Petersen is able to hit the notes in his loud, angry songs, but that's about all of the emotion the audience receives from his character. As far as giving Shrek "When Words Fail," his soft-spoken confession of love for Fiona, audience members wrinkle their brows as they wonder why he was cast for a song that he can't sing. If his inability to sing the ballad isn't enough, the plain lyrics and super-soft music put viewers to sleep.

In contrast to this miscalculation, the casting of Princess Fiona and Donkey are nailed right on the head. Haven Burton is everything an audience would want their Fiona to be: hilarious, talented and quirky. While these are all just characteristics of the character Burton portrays, she does a phenomenal job making the audience believe her character has really been locked in a tower for over a dozen years, waiting for true love.

Perhaps that's because of the musical number "I Know It's Today" which features our princess at three ages (child, teen and present young adult self) singing about how she knows her prince will come that day. It's quite relatable for all of the audience's single women waiting to find their own true loves. Burton's incredible voice which allows her to sing a range of songs from the identity-questioning "Who I'd Be" to the playful "Morning Person" in which she utilizes her tap-dancing talents as well.

Did the tour cast Eddie Murphy to play the live production of his movie character, Donkey? No, that's just Alan Mingo Jr. Mingo has mastered the original character played by movie actor, from the four-legged friend's voice to his movements. When the theatrical production infuses the line about "Everybody lovin' parfaits," audience members feel as if they're being tricked and Eddie Murphy is really behind the curtains speaking for Mingo.

But that's not such a bad thing, and the stage actor hobbling on two hooves manages to master choreography as he sings the jovial songs and runs in circles trying to avoid the giant, gospel-singing Dragon. Despite his restrictive costume, Mingo makes it look just as easy as walking, the weight of the donkey head on his shoulders unable to bring him down.

But it isn't just the fun-loving characters that make this show such an enjoyable night out. The versatile set is used so flawlessly that audiences hardly even realize the set is changing between the actors' scenes. One minute the show takes place deep within a tall, green forest and the next the audience finds themselves at the front of a palace with sunny skies shining above.

As far as the costumes go, it's very easy to believe the story is being acted out by actual ogres, donkeys and fun-sized rulers. Lord Farquaad (David F.M Vaughn) is given the most incredible costume of all. The black, red and gold fitted

costume, which has Vaughn on his knees as Farquaad strolls from one side of the stage to the other, his yellow-stockinged fake legs flopping against the black material of the costume. While the four-foot-tall character's costume comes off as something practical so any sized actor could portray the role, the cleverness of the costume is hidden. The production staff plays up the fact that the character is short and the actor is not by dressing Vaughn in black and having him "jump" (or really just have him stand) on the backs of his wooden dolls.

After seeing this show audiences will want to hear the songs again. They'll want to pop in the "Shrek" DVD in hopes of relieving the magical performance. They won't be too far off as the theatrical production stays true to the sure-to-be-classic fairytale. Once the audience views the performance they'll realize that this show is made for everyone because everyone can find something to love about it, be it the characters, the musical numbers or the hilarious script. Children will be laughing at the ridiculously brilliant costumes, teenagers will be smiling at the relatable plot, and adults will be cackling at the hidden comedy.

## By Erin Patterson

### SHREK THE MUSICAL > SHREK THE MOVIE

Everyone knows the Dreamworks story of the green ogre who accidentally falls in love with a princess, but never before has the story been told to music. This addition not only creates more depth for each character but also adds more humor to this already funny story. These new songs allow the audience to see a back story of the main characters, and explain why they are in their current situations.

For example, the audience for "Shrek the Musical" at the Hippodrome Theatre is introduced to Fiona's inner thoughts in "I Know It's Today" while she waits for her Prince Charming. We are similarly acquainted with Shrek's inner thoughts when he is sent away from his home as a child. This is a welcome change from the movie. The creators of the stage version have created a successful show by adding to a loved plot with new songs, more character development and a visually pleasing set.

The added songs create a window on the characters' inner life, therefore making this musical more intriguing. The audience leaves the theater humming songs under their breath, quoting their favorite line or talking about the incredible costumes and set. Younger audience members are heard repeating a silly line that they will, no doubt, repeat to their classmates in school the next day. Everyone still visualizes Shrek's green face and bulging waist-line, the diamond-encrusted tutu of the sugar-plum fairy and the realism of the life-sized dragon that appears on stage.

Shrek (Eric Petersen) is a giant ogre who is sent away from his family at a young age and warned that everyone will hate him and that he will not have a fairy-tale happy ending. His parents sweetly tell him that "it's a big bright beautiful world, with possibilities everywhere. It's peaches and cream, and everything come true...." And then surprise him with "But not for you."

When Shrek grows up, he is a bitter creature that enjoys being alone. Shrek is a hard-headed, stubborn fellow who was raised to hate the world, and thus never experiences love or friendship. The main theme of "Big, Bright, Beautiful World" repeats throughout the musical. Shrek first sings this theme explaining how he's happy to be alone, but this theme is twisted so that at the end of the show Shrek sings it to ask Fiona to marry him.

His solitude is disrupted, however, when many other fairy-tale characters are evacuated forced from their homes to live on his swamp. This invasion of privacy inspires him to travel to Duloc and confront Lord Farquaad (David Vaughn) in order to regain his land. On his way there he accidentally rescues the talkative Donkey (Alan Mingo, Jr.). When Shrek and Donkey arrive in Duloc, Farquaad tells Shrek that he may have his land back if he rescues Princess Fiona (Haven Burton) for Farquaad to marry.

When Shrek arrives at Fiona's tower she is irked by his lack of romance until she is told that she will be wedded to Farquaad. As the trio sets off, back to Duloc, Fiona grows apprehensive of the setting sun and we realize that she has a curse that can, of course, only be broken by true love's kiss. The next day Shrek tries to bring down Fiona's good mood by making fun of her new groom-to-be, and the two begin a contest of who had a worse childhood.

In the beginning song of the show, we see both Shrek and Fiona being sent away from their families at the same time. When they trade stories of being thrown out of their parents' homes, as well as some disgusting bodily noises, they realize how compatible they are. This is the beginning of the change the audience witnesses as Shrek develops from a sulky ogre to a confused, blushing creature in love. When the sun goes down again, Donkey finds out that Fiona turns into an ogre over night.

There are many ways a musical can fail, especially when based on a popular movie, but the creators of “Shrek the Musical” have avoided this with grace. Instead of simply putting music to the story of “Shrek,” they have created humor that was not in the original film and have added a twist to a well-known plot. The story line is the same, but the script is different, something that Shrek-lovers--and haters--will enjoy.

The songs develop the plot, and give the characters depth that didn’t exist in the movie. When Shrek is asked what he wants to be, he sings “Who I’d Be” in a softer voice that explains his character shift. He thinks for a couple seconds and then sings, with a hint of surprise in his voice, that he wants to be a hero, able to take off his helmet with pride for a princess. This softness in character made Shrek more appealing, and the story more interesting.

The creators have also ensured that the show does not just tell a story but also prompts the audience to laugh as often as possible. Humor is important in a show like “Shrek the Musical” because the plot and the jokes are already known by the majority of America, and therefore new jokes must be added to keep the audience laughing at new aspects of the story. When one enters the theater, one may think “Okay, Shrek the Musical, it could be cute.” But after viewing, one is blown away by the cleverness of the show. All of the songs have funny lyrics, and each stage character mocks the movie character. Lord Farquaad, for instance, is played by a man on his knees, so that it looks as though he has tiny legs below a full-sized body.

The revolving stage adds realism to the characters traveling far, far away, and the backdrops help the viewer know where the characters are at any particular time in the show. Shrek’s swamp is characterized by a dingy shack with many bushes surrounding it and sign sticking out of the ground that reads “Beware of Ogre.” The city of Duloc, by contrast, is very clean with straight lines. The citizens were uniformed and precise in all their movements because Farquaad wants to create a perfect world.

Each ensemble member has to play more than one character, often very different characters from scene to scene. The same actress plays Gingy the gingerbread man and Mama Bear at the same time on stage. These multiple roles work only because the costumes are so detailed and colorful that when all the characters are on stage, you get a sense of every individual fairytale in one big setting. “Shrek the Musical” is underappreciated. The story of a mean ogre falling in love does not seem like it would be a huge hit on Broadway, yet the attention to detail in the production leaves the audience with a satisfied feeling that they lack when watching the movie. Those who enjoyed the movie and those who hated the movie should go see this delightfully witty production.

Many objections to Shrek were posed when the movie was released for its so-so animation and jokes with juvenile clichés, but many families loved its amusing and charming characters. The musical nullifies these issues by satisfying visual needs with its bright colors in the costumes and scenery, and replacing juvenile jokes with new, witty and knowingly sassy dialogue. “Shrek the Musical” is a show that the whole family may enjoy. Children will love the plot and characters, and adults will love the jokes and songs.

By Max Spitz

## **FUN FOR THE KIDS, BUT NOT MUCH ELSE**

The ugly, green ogre. The comical talking animal. The trapped, cursed princess. When Dreamworks released “Shrek” in 2001, they revolutionized these classic characters in a revamped and twisted fairytale. It gained recognition for appealing to people of all ages and presenting a new take on popular stories. The entire film was filled with the usual, childish humor found in most animated films, but such fare was interspersed with maturity and subtlety that charmed the older generations as well.

Now, in 2011 however, “Shrek: The Musical” adds little more than music to the tired franchise. While this show continues to appeal to the younger generations, it loses its mass appeal even when backed up by strong performers. The movie managed to create an atmosphere of maturity that appealed to all ages; it succeeded in creating varying fare throughout the film that could appeal to anyone. This musical, however, seems to have focused its humor and presentation in on children; its overly bright and cheesy presentation puts off most of the older age groups.

In adapting the movie into a staged musical, David Lindsay-Abaire and Jeanine Tesori keep the majority of the original’s jokes and stay faithful to its plot and characters. However, it is in this that they stumble. While some of the jokes bring back a sense of nostalgia, most simply seem out of place. After knowing Shrek for years as a movie, the presentation as a stage play is unwelcome and stale, rather than new or innovative, as the movie felt when it came

out.

Even the juxtaposition of the stereotypical “princess” image with a tough and crass inner personality, presented here through Princess Fiona, no longer feels novel, having been exhausted past any point of originality. “Shrek” falls prey to over repetition of jokes; after time, they simply are not funny anymore. This is unfortunate for Lindsay-Abaire and Tesori who have attempted to write a strong adaptation but simply cannot capture the age-spanning entertainment of the original movie. While in some moments “Shrek: The Musical” does reach out to an audience of all ages, these instances are few and far between.

“Shrek” opens on the young ogre, celebrating his seventh birthday with his parents. Rather than gifts, however, they present him with the news that he must leave them to wander the world unloved. This harsh treatment sets the atmosphere for the hatred Shrek receives from almost everyone. Taking his parents’ advice, Shrek sets up a home in a swamp on the outskirts of the kingdom of Duloc.

He lives peacefully alone for years, never once longing for company, preferring instead to forget the world beyond his swamp. The musical feels the need to use its opening to set up Shrek as a sympathetic character, which backfires when he bursts in, fully grown, perfectly content with his solitary lifestyle. The movie version skipped any introduction to Shrek, preferring to begin with him as an adult. This opening allowed the viewer to make an unbiased judgment of him, thus providing for further surprise when Shrek develops into a truly sensitive ogre.

Unfortunately for Shrek, this blissful ignorance is not to last. Lord Farquaad, the ruler of Duloc, decides that he dislikes all freakish, fairy-tale creatures (ignoring of course, his own small stature), and decrees that all of them must leave Duloc. In accordance with his decree, a slew of famous characters, including Pinocchio, the Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf are all forced onto Shrek’s swamp. Understandably, Shrek is none too happy about this and decides to venture to Duloc and force Farquaad to return his swamp.

Luckily, Eric Peterson does not disappoint as Shrek. It is evident that Peterson must have studied Mike Myer’s original performance as, vocally, the two are nigh identical. Peterson explores all the many “layers” presented in Shrek, and valiantly works towards a deep character. He never falters along Shrek’s transformation, from the opening hatred of anyone else to his acceptance of Donkey and finally with his true love for Fiona.

Backing all this up with a strong baritone voice, Peterson steps above the material given to him with a multifaceted performance. His strongest moment comes in his ballad “Who I’d Be,” when all the show’s aspects come together in a truly evocative song. In this song, Peterson is at his most powerful, and he allows the simple depth in his voice and character to come through.

Midway through his journey, Shrek meets Donkey, a talking animal on the run, and offers him safety in return for directions to Duloc. As Donkey, Alan Mingo Jr. performs with energy and joie de vivre, but does not quite achieve the comic heights expected from this role. Eddie Murphy set the bar too high in his vocal performance in the original movie. Mingo does bring out Donkey’s physicality with expressive mannerisms and explosive energy, overcoming his handicap of hoofed-in-hands. However, Mingo’s comic timing wavers through the show, often fumbling line delivery. He also seems to be less of a singer than the role would call for, as he often allows his crackling voice to overtake his pitch and send him flat.

Shrek’s small gesture of kindness soon turns into much more, as Donkey accompanies him for the remainder of his trek. In interpreting this moment, the musical seems to stay close to the movie’s portrayal, with one small difference. In the movie, Shrek permits Donkey to join him simply out of pure laziness and no desire to inflict pain on Donkey. The musical, however, uses this as a moment to add in another song, full of puns, but lacking any substance. It simply serves as an over-extended scene to give Donkey more time in the spotlight.

Upon arrival in Duloc, Farquaad laments his inability to marry a princess and become a true king. David F.M. Vaughn has easily the biggest challenge in the show as Lord Farquaad, forced to play the entire role on his knees. Considering this difficulty, Vaughn does a commendable job, making strong use of arm gestures and facial expression. However, in certain moments, his energy falls away from him and he seems to lose interest.

Highlighted for the numbers “What’s Up, Duloc?” and “The Ballad of Farquaad,” Vaughn’s singing itself is not exceptionally strong, but rather he slips into a talk-sing that fits the songs well and he carries them with the pompous, self-important air that comes from Farquaad. He strikes a deal with Shrek and Donkey that if they bring him Princess Fiona, then Shrek will receive the deed to his swampland. However, this turns out to be quite the task, as Fiona is in the tallest tower in a dragon-guarded fortress, surrounded by a moat of lava.

Naturally, Fiona’s rescue does not remain a pivotal point for long. Rather the show’s focus shifts towards a blossoming

relationship between Shrek and Fiona, as well as Shrek's deepening character and his realization that living alone might not be all he thought it was.

As Fiona, Haven Burton captures the character's crass lack of subtlety and slight instability well. She has the right amount of energy to portray Fiona's borderline insanity, but sometimes goes overboard. Her singing often comes across as shrieking; it seems as if Burton can either act or sing, but not at the same time. During her opening song "I Know It's Today," she harmonizes well with her younger counterparts, but loses her charm when descending into shouting during her own mini-mental breakdown.

Fiona's character, in the musical, is stressed as being rude and crass, as well as slightly bipolar. However, this does little to remove the "damsel in distress" stereotype that made Cameron Diaz's Fiona so appealing in the movie. Diaz's Fiona fights off the marauding Robin Hood and his Merry Men singlehandedly, all while maintaining perfect composure. This paints a new light on Fiona as the tough, shockingly independent princess, a new take on the femme label.

In a show geared towards such a younger group, one would expect the content and humor to naturally lower itself as well. Unfortunately, the show rarely ever lifts itself beyond child's fare. Because the majority of the jokes seem juvenile, the few attempts at more mature humor ("Do you think he might be compensating for something?") come across as clichéd and unfitting.

"Shrek" devotes an unnecessary amount of time to playing various bodily functions over the sound system, and forcing the actors to painstakingly respond. To play out an entire scene full of flatulence and call it comic is simply an insult to humor. The little ones in the audience love it though, so that certainly wraps up a large portion of ticket-buyers, as their parents have to attend the show with them.

In contrast, a strikingly whimsical moment comes midway through Fiona's upbeat number "Morning Person." This song acts as an energetic opener to Act II, as Fiona dances her way through her own vibrant morning. Halfway, she runs into the Pied Piper, which leads to a sudden tap-line with the dancers' shoes dressed up as rats. This comic visual comes as a surprise and is followed by a continuation of the tap dance with dancers in full rat garb. In these moments, "Shrek" shows its true potential, and reaches a point past the simplicity of juvenile entertainment.

Visually, the show attempts to find a stronghold, only to fall short. Pinocchio's costume-and-makeup combo is absolutely the most impressive, creating joints, creaks and splinters that exemplify his woodiness. The cleverest design comes through Lord Farquaad, where the costume takes away several feet from the actor, disguising the fact that he spends the entire show on his knees. However, even this strong point has some faults as the seams between costume and face often show through, specifically with the various ogres, and overall many makeup lines remain unblended.

The actors do their best with the material presented to them. Blakely Slaybaugh is quite hilarious as Pinocchio, embodying his character with jerky, harsh movements that mimic his marionette perfectly. Even his shrieking, shrill voice does not annoy in any way, but rather fits his character's insecurity perfectly. Despite her small role, Carrie Compere is stunning as the Dragon's singing voice. The detail that went into creating the Dragon's puppet is brilliant, and it brings out both frightening and enthralling emotions throughout her song. However, Compere creates a human aspect in the beast through her powerhouse vocals in "Forever." Her strong belt effortlessly filled the dragon's body and created just the force needed from such a character.

Sometimes, even in musical theater, a production is created with only one specific age group in mind. In truth, this is the very attitude that comes across in "Shrek the Musical." With an overabundance of crude and childish humor, it almost misses the very moral of the story. "Shrek" is, at heart, a story of accepting the differences between people and loving each other for who we are.

Sadly, "Shrek" itself overlooked this message by presenting a production that forgets its older audience in unabashed favoritism towards small children. Luckily, the show manages to shine through small moments and strong performances. However, these little mercies do little to help save anyone past puberty from the rest of the show. If Lindsay-Abaire and Tesori had focused on creating a show that appealed to all ages, they might have created a true success. However, in "Shrek," they simply missed their mark.

# *West Side Story*

**By Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein  
and Stephen Sondheim**

**At the Hippodrome Theatre through April 24**

**By Abby Salazar  
UN POCO LOCO**

How far would you go in the name of love? Would you forget everything that matters to you in order to make that special someone happy? Despite all the forces trying to stop them from being together, the title characters in William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" do everything for their love. The familiar story of these star-crossed lovers is closely mirrored in "West Side Story" at the Hippodrome Theatre. Because it is a classic piece that has been successfully distinguished throughout the decades, the expectations for the performance are high. Yet, despite the breathtaking music, choreography, set and lighting, the production fails to meet the standards of a successful musical.

"West Side Story" is a well-known American musical that has been in production for over 50 years. This gives the performers a lot to work with, but the actors fail to grasp this opportunity. A bold and vivacious musical is expected, but a slow and lifeless play is presented. Powerless movements and weak performances overshadow the exemplary music of the orchestra. The excessive Spanish dialogue detaches the audience from the play and makes it difficult to understand.

Set in the mid-1950s in the Upper West Side of New York, two rival gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, fight over the control of the neighborhood. Bernardo (German Santiago) leads the Puerto Rican Sharks, and Riff (Joseph J. Simeone) and Tony (Ted Ely) lead the Italian-American Jets. Prior to a rumble, both gangs attend a dance where Bernardo's sister, Maria (Ali Ewoldt), dances with the wrong guy—Tony. The two immediately fall in love as the world around them falls apart.

The play opens with men tumbling across the stage. This seems to be the longest scene in the play because of how boring and uninteresting it is. If one closes his or her eyes and listens to the powerful orchestra music, he or she wouldn't miss much because the actors would still be waltzing around the stage lifelessly. It fails as an opening because it does not exemplify the excitement that is otherwise present in the vivacious musical. With such a poor opening scene, the play can only get better.

The Jets represent the troublemaking Montagues from "Romeo and Juliet." Despite their ragged clothing in comparison to the Sharks' clean dress shirts, the Jets believe that they are superior in the neighborhood, so they seek to remind the Puerto Rican gang that they are unwilling to compromise on control of the neighborhood.

The rival gangs fight each other, but the motions are very unconvincing because of the lack of physical contact. Their movements flow smoothly like dance moves; however, there isn't enough power in their body language to effectively represent a brawl. Fortunately, the intense music keeps the audience's attention on the scene and outweighs the poor performance. Police officers interrupt the fight, so the two gangs agree to have a rumble.

Prior to the rumble, both gangs decide to attend a dance. Maria and Anita (Michelle Aravena) are in the bridal shop getting ready. Maria is supposed to be with Chino (Jay Garcia), but she does not feel a spark with him. The set is effectively transitioned from a bridal shop into a school gym in a matter of seconds. In the midst of the lively dancing, Tony and Maria find themselves in each other's arms.

The dancers' movements in the background portray the progression of their conversation. As the two begin to talk, the

dancers make simple and slow movements with their arms. Their interest in each other becomes more evident, so the dancers make more interesting and faster movements. Tony and Maria are enamored by each other, as depicted by Tony's song, "Maria," and they continue their conversation on Maria's balcony, which mirrors Romeo and Juliet's balcony scene. Although their body positions create an awkward picture to look at, the blue and purple lights create a beautiful shadow in the background that produces a more romantic silhouette

The production depicts the significance of the Puerto Rican and American cultural barriers. Lt. Schrank (Christopher Patrick Mullens) states, "It's pitiful what you Puerto Ricans have done to this neighborhood," implying that they cause the conflicts on the streets. The cultural differences further intensify the conflict between the two gangs by providing more reasons for them to show hostility towards one another. The Italian-American Jets believe that they should have more power in the neighborhood because they have lived there longer than the Puerto Rican Sharks. The Sharks' pride makes them believe that they deserve the power.

The Puerto Rican culture also plays a role in the way the plot unfolds. The recent addition of more Spanish dialogue in this production contributes to the failure of the play. The basic Spanish that the original play had effectively developed the conversations and allowed the audience to have a glimpse of the culture; however, the inclusion of more conversational Spanish makes it difficult to understand

Anita and the other Sharks get into an argument that is completely in Spanish. Are they upset that Maria danced with someone other than Chino? Are they worried that Maria disappeared after the dance? Are they blaming each other for letting her out of their sight? Do they know that Tony is the guy Maria mistakenly danced with? The audience will never know--unless they speak fluent Spanish. The actors' body language clearly depicts an argument, but it is not specified what they are fighting about.

The actors' movements smoothly flow with a hint of dance, even during a non-choreographed number. Anita does this the most effectively. Every motion she makes exemplifies a strong Latina woman from the way she flips her hair to the way she points her toes. Maria expresses her childish character with the way she giggles and prances around in her room, especially during her performance of "I Feel Pretty" ("Me Siento Hermosa"). Her body language ameliorates her performance despite her lack of articulation that makes her dialogue difficult to understand.

Despite its many flaws, the production is not a total failure. The strong body language betters the audience's understanding of each scene. They clearly depict what they are trying to portray, although they fail to articulate it with words. The set design enhances the appeal of the play as well. During the performance of "Someday," a blank, white backdrop is displayed. It encapsulates the audience in the scene because of its brightness, but it also emphasizes its significance. The actors are dressed in white to represent their innocent and hopeful desire to be "somewhere, a place for [them], peace and quiet and open air."

The classic plot of "West Side Story" effectively mirrors the famous "Romeo and Juliet"; however, the production does not meet the standards of a renowned Broadway musical. The accents, music, costumes, choreography, set and lighting all successfully set the scenes, but the actors' poor performances weaken the show. If you're looking for an enjoyable show, don't expect a mind-blowing performance; otherwise, when the curtains close, you will be left thinking, "That's it?"

## **By Carson Ziegler**

### **WEST SIDE TRAIN WRECK**

A musical so renowned and so widely known as "West Side Story" encourages one to have especially high expectations for the new production now at the Hippodrome Theatre, but many had their hopes dashed by the poor execution. Musicals require a fine balance of song and dance to entertain the audience, and this production failed to weigh these key elements properly. Having practiced for such exceptional choreography, had they no time left for reinforcing their vocals?

The opening scene, the "Prologue," sets up the territorial bout between the American gang, the Jets, and the Puerto Rican gang, the Sharks. Each group of young delinquents dances within its own clique and fights against the other. A

high point for the musical's choreography arrives during the first encounter. As the gangs grow more testy and violent towards one another, the more outstanding are the leaps and the more the punches blend together, creating a form of dancing while fist fighting. The scene ushers in "Jet Song," sung by Riff, the gang leader, and the Jets. From here, though, the production takes a turn for the worse.

"Jet Song" introduces Riff (Joseph Simeone) as the leader, who naturally should have the strongest voice of the gang when singing in unison or in a solo; however, his voice falls short of anything remotely worth listening to. Rough and scratchy, incapable of hitting high nor long notes, his voice is in no way made for a musical, yet, here is the most disappointing piece of the production, none of the actors nor actresses have the singing voice needed for this substantial production.

Soon the co-founder of the Jets is shown in, Tony (Kyle Harris), who sings alone about how "Something's Coming." Tony, our "Romeo" for the musical, should have the most powerful voice of the entire cast, yet his singing does not come close to fitting that part. Tony, of course, was not the only one at fault for the musical's low-grade piping and shouting. It was a matter of searching for whose voice is least appalling to find the "best" singer.

Soon the dancing becomes quite over-the-top, almost forced into scenes like in "America," where Anita (Michelle Aravena), Rosalia (Dea Julien) and the rest of the Shark Girls sing and dance about what is so great about living in their adopted country. Though their whiny, irritating singing is loathsome enough, the dancing is reminiscent of a can-can with extra spins and running around. It is as if the production had to meet a quota of dance numbers and decides to just sprinkle them in aimlessly. The one reputable element in this musical number is the orchestra's performance. It was not a matter of the orchestra being too loud, but that one would tune out the singing and focus on where the true talent was being expressed, offstage.

It took until Scene Eight for there to be a bearable performance, the ensemble version of "Tonight." This is definitely a far better rendition of "Tonight" than one performed earlier on in the musical with only Maria (Ali Ewoldt), our "Juliet," and Tony. The duet only emphasized their inability to carry a tune. Later when the company all sings "Tonight," they managed to successfully drown out each other's imperfections and at last sound mediocre.

After a long and grueling Act I, Act II at last ushers in some much needed entertainment. The first musical number of the second Act, "I Feel Pretty" ("Me Siento Hermosa"), is performed by Maria and accompanied by her friends Rosalia, Consuela (Lori Ann Ferreri) and Fernanda (Kathryn Lin Terza). Though this song is playful and humorous, a lot of that feeling is taken away due to half of the song being vocalized in Spanish. Though this performance is accurate to how young Puerto Rican girls might sing, it unintentionally takes away the light-hearted humor from the audience, and replaces it with an air of curiosity and a sense of confusion as to what the remnants of the song means.

Luckily, the musical number that follows properly displays a group-merriment in "Gee, Officer Krupke." Performed by the Jets and led by their most animated member, Action (Drew Foster), the young ne'er-do-wells insult Officer Krupke (Mike Boland) behind his back and mock their own life and circumstances in the process. Ranging from slapstick humor to lewd jokes and gestures, the song portrays the gang as they see themselves: as American trash. Surprisingly, despite Drew's constantly cracking voice, the scene holds up with the gang's acting; intentional or not, Drew's vocals only add to the humor.

All in all, the highs are limited and the lows are excessive; though parts of the production are enjoyable, for the most part it fails to uphold its name. "West Side Story" is all about song and dance coming together to express a 1950's rendition of "Romeo and Juliet," which this musical is unsuccessful in accomplishing. Next time around, more time should be spent on sharpening a cast's vocals, rather than making sure they can step in tune.

## **By Emily Braverman**

### **WHERE ART THOU, TONY?**

A graffiti-laced curtain rises, revealing a desolate New York City neighborhood of the mid-1950s. The stage is bare except for the overpass painted on the backdrop and the few fire-escapes rolling in from the wings. Alas, two rival gangs enter the stage, each taking their proper place on the segregated sides. The tension builds, and the tough gang



members unexpectedly break into song and dance. This is not just any gang fight-this is the feud of the Jets and Sharks. One that is resolved through song, ballet and a little romance too.

“West Side Story,” Arthur Laurents’ classic 1950s twist on “Romeo and Juliet,” is now playing at the Hippodrome Theatre. The musical retells the story of the Shakespearean couple in the crime-ridden streets of New York City. This modern view emphasizes cultural difference as opposed to territorial arguments as modern audiences face debates on immigration, discrimination and stereotypes that remain today.

But this is good as it helps to define the same social problems in our nation today. This new version of the show add a heavier use of Spanish within the dialogue while still making it understandable for the non-Spanish speaking observers, The dancing ranges culturally as well, from Latin ballroom to groovy ‘50s moves.

Like the title characters of William Shakespeare’s play, Laurents’ Tony and Maria meet one night and share a magical kiss which lets them know they are destined to be together. But Maria’s background lies with the Sharks, and Tony is a former Jet. Despite the furor their new love has caused throughout the community, the two “star-crossed” lovers plan their getaway and wedding. They follow their love into death just as Romeo and Juliet did.

This musical adaption of the love story excels in one area that Shakespeare couldn’t touch: dance. Right off the bat, for example, the audience is welcomed to the show with an unexpected gang fight, a gang fight where dance moves are being used as weapons.

The Puerto Rican Sharks and the Italian-American Jets are willing to do anything to claim the neighborhood as their own. The last thing the audience expects from these tough young men, built with muscles and intimidating facial expressions, is to break out into extremely high leaps and high kicks in their tight jeans. Instantly, the audience is captivated by the length of their extensions and the dancers’ ability to convey the art of fist-fighting through a series of technical ballet jumps.

Original choreographer Jerome Robbins and the current choreographer Joey McKneely excel in their task. During the opening fight sequence, moves are cleverly incorporated to imitate an actual fight as one dancer leaps across the stage and onto the legs of another, balancing on him skillfully as if tackling his opponent. It isn’t just the cleverly choreographed fight sequences that have the audience gasping; a scene featuring both gangs and their “ladies” at a community dance features the most riveting dancing of all. The dance-off during “Dance at the Gym” features Latin styling as well as classic American ‘50s moves as both styles utilize the talented chorus dancers that have obviously been perfecting their extensions since a young age.

Perhaps the most elegant and classical dance number is during “Somewhere.” The sequence features strict ballet choreography which includes masterful lifts and partnering work which are beautifully executed. The choreography is key to the plot. The range of movement, tempo of the numbers and the power of the dancers convey the emotion of each scene. A few dancers perform smaller, romantic movements during the love songs, and there are plentiful ensemble members during the high-speed, energetic songs.

It’s clear that it is the dance and choreography that carry the show from curtain rise to fall. With an extremely skilled dance ensemble, the lead roles are put under the bus. Lead characters Tony (Kyle Harris) and Maria (Ali Ewoldt) are more than capable of portraying lovesick teenagers, just not nearly as capable as singing out that love. Their lack of vocal ability is a huge letdown after such powerful opening dance numbers.

During Tony’s two ballads, “Something’s Coming” and “Maria” the audience flinches at Harris’ inability to maintain his notes as he screeches his way through both songs. While Ewoldt’s voice is bearable, her vocals are unable to convince the audience that she is willing to die for her love as Juliet did for Romeo. The two cast members are hardly involved in the large dance numbers and with their less-than-average voices it’s a wonder how they landed their leading roles.

However there is one star among the cast. Anita (Michelle Aravena), Maria’s best pal and head of the Shark girls, radiates stardom whenever on the stage. Aravena holds the rest of her cast mates to standards none of them can meet. She’s a real triple threat, and the only truly convincing character. Aravena uses her acting skills to portray a range of emotions from when Anita is seducing Shark leader Bernardo (German Santiago) to a scene in which the Jet boys toss her around and make a failed attempt at rape. She sings with a perfect Puerto Rican accent in “America” while simultaneously leading and executing perfect Latin ballroom dances.

The accurate-to-the-time choreography is complemented by bright costumes true to the 1950s. The Sharks sport class jackets while their ladies wear Latin dresses with frilly skirts perfect for twirling and cha-chaing. The Jets wear raggedy jeans and cut off t-shirts with dirt stains upon their clothing and faces. The most intricate part of the costuming is one of the subtler accessories. Both the Jets and Sharks wear a bandana somewhere on their bodies; for the Jets a red bandana and a purple one for the Sharks. These colors also carry through to the gangs' wardrobes as each gang character wears colors either in the red family or the purple.

Unlike Shakespeare's original play of the two lovers with fateful matching deaths, "West Side Story" saves the audience half the trouble of losing two characters. Laurents adds a bittersweet twist to the plot, only taking one "star-crossed" lover and replacing the other death with an entire show of brilliant choreography. With the dances and dancers, the newly Spanish-friendly version of "West Side Story" captivates audiences, sending them into a trance in which pointed feet and arched backs fascinates them all.

**By Erin Patterson**

## **"WEST SIDE STORY"--A TRUE ADAPTATION OF "ROMEO AND JULIET?"**

The curtain rises. Two men are seen on stage, simply standing. More men join them with every passing second, and eventually snapping is heard. This is the well-known beginning of "West Side Story," now at the Hippodrome Theater. This is the award-winning adaptation of William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," but many of the changes to the original were not good choices. The new alterations make the audience realize the weak points of the plot and character development, and leave them skeptical of the "true love" between Tony and Maria.

Poor choices in character development in the script and inadequate acting ruin the relationship between the hero and his love. The "true love" that many adore in "Romeo and Juliet" is lost when their love turns to lust. Tony and Maria seem too young to be in love, and the script mirrors this in the climactic ending.

The finger-snapping opening of "West Side Story" evolves into an elaborate dance number establishing the tension between two opposing New York gangs. The Jets are the white gang, led by Riff (Joseph J. Simeone) and Tony (Kyle Harris). The opposing force is the Puerto Rican Sharks, led by Bernardo (German Santiago). Their competition for the streets escalates to a point where neither can coexist with any form of understanding.

But when Tony and Bernardo's younger sister Maria (Ali Ewoldt) meet at a dance, no one can do anything to stop their love at first sight. This new relationship causes even more tension between the two gangs, and they plan to rumble under the highway for territory. Trying to avoid the choice between his gang and his love, Tony goes, hoping to prevent it. His attempt at stopping the fight, however, goes terribly wrong, and before the lovers can comprehend the events taking place, tragedy strikes, and doesn't end until the curtain falls.

When one adapts such a well-known and classic story into something more modern, there will always be tremendous changes, yet the plot of the story should remain basically the same to be successful. The two feuding families, in "Romeo and Juliet," the Capulets and Montagues, are represented in "West Side Story" by the Sharks and the Jets. Like Romeo and Juliet, Tony and Maria come from rival factions but meet at a dance when they see each other from across the room. Tony and Maria are instantly in love, and kiss right then and there. Riff and Bernardo see this and rip them apart.

The next scene is "the balcony scene" where the two confess their undying love. This confession becomes humorous, after seeing the main two characters simply dance together a little. In Shakespeare, they fall in love with before getting within six feet of each other, but in the ensuing minutes they have a conversation that gives their relationship character to build up to the dramatic ending. In "West Side Story," they can barely get any words out because they are too busy kissing. This doesn't seem like true love, but true lust.

The other big difference between the old and the new is the ending. Traditionally, Juliet is rumored to be dead, but she's actually sleeping. Romeo sees her dead and is so grief-stricken that he kills himself. Juliet then wakes up, sees the dead Romeo, and also kills herself. This is the most important part of the play. Romeo buys poison to kill himself in order to reunite with his love in the afterlife because he cannot live without her. Juliet does the same thing when she sees Romeo dead.

In “West Side Story,” Tony runs through the streets looking for Chino, whom he wants to kill in revenge of Maria’s death. This does not remain true to the Romeo who simply needs to know if Juliet is alive or not. Tony simply believes she is dead. Then instead of killing himself, he is more concerned with killing Chino. This crucial distinction proves that he isn’t worried about love, or Maria, but that he is “a Jet all the way,” more interested with killing someone in the opposing gang than the consequences it could have.

Then, when Tony is shot right before Maria’s eyes, she doesn’t kill herself. In “Romeo and Juliet” the suicide is critical because it explains the love Romeo and Juliet feel for each other. The simple fact that they cannot live without each other is the main point of the story. When Maria walks away from her dead “true love,” one is left thinking that maybe their love was lost after all. This isn’t to say that true love cannot coexist with physical lust, however, but love is often confused with lust during adolescence.

Part of Tony is older and more mature than the rest of the Jets. He founded the gang but has now outgrown it. He does not hang out with the gang anymore but instead has a job. It is safe to assume that Tony meets Maria and wants to spend the rest of his life with her. Harris, however, plays him as a very awkward boy in his upper adolescent years with no intentions of marrying anyone. It makes more sense that he would just be looking for a girl to have a fling with. Harris’ interpretation of Tony compromised the entire production, leaving the underlying story of true love untouched.

The stage production of “West Side Story”—originally produced in 1957—also differed from the 1961 movie version in how it handled the song “There’s a Place for Us.” In the movie the song is sung by Maria and Tony about finding a place to go where they can be safe and happy together without the issues of the gangs. In the new stage production the unwanted Jets member, Anybodys (Alexandra Frohlinger,) sings the while Tony and Maria sing backup with the rest of the cast.

This new singer changes the whole meaning of the song. Instead of Maria and Tony singing of a way to be together despite everything, the whole cast comes on stage in a ballet number, so that the words “There’s a place for us, a time and place for us,” become a big “Kumbaya” moment that is inappropriate for the given situation. The whole cast doesn’t need to be somewhere else to be happy, because they enjoy the fights and territory wars. Even if some members did want to leave, there is nothing stopping them from just leaving. It is only Maria and Tony that want to run away together in order to be together.

“West Side Story” is enjoyable overall. The complex dancing is precise and keeps the audience’s adrenaline pumping. The familiar tunes are some of Leonard Bernstein’s greatest. The tunes in “West Side Story” are staples in the theater, even though it’s been over 50 years since the show was originally produced.

The distinction between the gangs is remarkable, from the accents to the costumes. The Jets wear accents of orange in wristbands, ties or vests. The Sharks follow this same format, but wear purple. Anita’s dress is purple; Chino wears purple pants, and Bernardo is clad in a brilliant purple suit. Tony and Maria also wear the same shade of grey-blue when they pretend to be getting married. Then, when Tony goes to the rumble with the Jets and the Sharks, he throws on an orange jacket over his blue shirt. After he kills Bernardo, he takes this jacket off so when he goes to Maria, they are again wearing the same color.

While the show was enjoyable to watch, the changes made to the script were not successful. Even when making a show more modern, it is important to retain those points in the plot that explain the relationships between characters. “West Side Story” has been on the stage for over 50 years. The music has been adapted to operas, marching band shows and even orchestral works, yet not even Leonard Bernstein could save this failed adaptation of “Romeo and Juliet.”

## **By Max Spitz**

### **A REVIVAL SHAKES AND SPUTTERS BUT STILL STANDS**

When presented with classic Shakespeare, high school students rarely respond positively, preferring more modern shows, especially musicals. These teenagers often resist the classics’ older, convoluted language and often seemingly confusing plotlines. The crowning achievement of “West Side Story” is that it adapts the Shakespearean “Romeo and Juliet” into a tale of 1950s gang violence and racial tension. This modernization strips away the original Renaissance feeling, creating a new setting and framework that eases teenagers into the story and its beauty.

The Capulets and Montagues become the Jets (Italian-American) and Sharks (Puerto Rican), with the star-crossed lovers themselves now Tony and Maria. With a powerhouse score from Bernstein and Sondheim, “West Side Story” encapsulates the bitter rivalry and pure love with a style and delivery that even the most diehard anti-Shakespeareans can relate to.

Unfortunately, working with strong content does not necessarily mean the performance will be nearly as successful. The original script has been adapted, with the help of Lin-Manuel Miranda, so that a large amount of the Sharks’ dialogue is now spoken in Spanish, adding a sense of realism to their interactions. However, it also runs the risk of confusing any English speaker who might lose track of certain conversations and their direction. This minor alteration’s possibility for trouble exemplifies the whole revival and its difficulties. Overall, this production suffers from inconsistencies throughout, not just in the bilingual dialogue, but also in the cast, direction and choreography.

The director, David Saint, has partnered with choreographer Joey McKneely to create an intensely dance-heavy production. McKneely has adapted Jerome Robbins’ original choreography, and it shines throughout, showing a deft understanding of character dynamics and a vast diversity in his abilities. The tough, male-heavy “Prologue” and “Jet Song” are filled with hard-hitting punches and a large amount of thrusting and flexing. Conversely, in “America” the Puerto Rican women leap, shimmy and kick across the stage with a feisty Latin flair.

Unfortunately, the production seems too eager to add in as much dancing as possible. Normally, the emotional ballad “Somewhere” is kept between Tony and Maria, as they lament how no one around them accepts their love. However, in this production, it becomes a full-cast number, with a lengthy dance sequence, supposedly in the lovers’ dreams. While the dancing itself remains pleasant to watch, it completely changes the song’s dynamic and ruins what would be the intimate climax of Tony and Maria’s love.

In a show so reliant on the gang conflicts and their violence, the fight scenes too seem much too heavily choreographed and ruin the frenzied feeling of such impromptu skirmishes. Punches and kicks stop full feet away from their destinations. The movements jerk on and off, with none of the real fluidity of a rumble. The over-preparedness damages the pivotal fight scenes, as well as the realism normally found in “West Side Story.”

Luckily for this dance-loaded production, every cast member demonstrates brilliant dancing skills. The Jets remain in sync throughout the “Prologue” and the “Jet Song,” as well as the entire cast during the fast paced, frenzied “Dance at the Gym.” Never once does a performer lose character mid-dance or broadcast any sort of mistake to the audience. Even in the smaller moments, the cast’s dance background shines through as actors walk with pointed steps and rhythmic strides. The dancing acts as the purest expression of the characters’ feelings, deepening the teenage audience’s relation to them and presenting a raw representation of the story’s emotions that can be traced back to the original Shakespeare.

As for the actual performances, while they are not without their bright spots, certain actors struggle to fit their roles, let alone perform them well. As the Jets’ leader Riff, Joseph J. Simeone lacks the powerhouse presence that would lead him to become the gang’s leader. Physically smaller than all of his fellow gang members, Simeone does little to overcome this, acting without the strength expected.

It is not until “Cool,” when he is called upon to calm his gang in the face of an upcoming “rumble” that Simeone finds his character. Throughout this song, he dominates the Jets, with a strong determination shown in an intent but relaxed stride. However, an overall lack of solid acting only distances the characters from their Shakespearean foundation. It undoes the purity of the adaptation that draws in teenagers by making the characters less real and relatable.

As the male romantic presence in “West Side Story,” Tony (Kyle Harris) completely lacks the vocal strength needed for the role. His voice cracks and veers off pitch constantly throughout “Something’s Coming” and as the only person on stage, Harris has nothing and no one to distract from his faults. Luckily, he does manage to achieve a deeper character in his acting; Harris’s desperation and pure love shines through his active inability to relinquish any sort of contact with Maria (Ali Ewoldt) and his utter happiness at the prospect of their marriage. Unfortunately, due to a further fault in direction, Harris and Ewoldt are forced to kiss any time where they do not talk or sing, turning their passionate love into physical lust.

The show’s strongest performances come from the pair of Maria and Anita (Michelle Aravena), the Latina best friends. Ewoldt embodies innocence in her quiet, soft voice and subtle expressions. Surrounded by her loud, exuberant Latina compatriots, Ewoldt remains controlled, rather than reverting to the bigger, more chaotic gestures of those around her. She has a quiet confidence, insisting that Tony see the realistic outcome of their love: that the prejudicial setting they live in would seek to destroy their union. Ewoldt’s entire being conveys both insecurity in their dangerous

relationship and passionate desperation. Her powerful belt helps to overcome the less capable Harris throughout their many duets.

As Anita, Aravena portrays a polar-opposite character, full of energy and sass. Forgoing all hesitations, she captures the feisty, self-confident Anita with style. The loud, uninhibited Aravena contrasts sharply with the quiet, restrained Ewoldt. With a tall stride and sweeping yet powerful movements, Aravena fully takes on Anita's wish to assimilate, as well as her desire that all those around her do the same. Aravena dances with finesse as she leaps and skips across the stage with a controlled freedom in her movements.

Her strength in performing this aspect of Anita makes it all more impressive when Anita powers through her half of the duet "A Boy Like That." In this number, Anita warns Maria the dangers of loving Tony, an American who has already brought tragedy to the both of them. Aravena brings both anger and love to this song, as she pleads with Ewoldt to remember their place in society as unwanted immigrants. The dynamic between the two is stunning, as they interact flawlessly with completely believable fluidity and honesty.

At its core, "West Side Story" presents a story of the purest love at first sight, yet doomed to failure. Tony and Maria live but a day together, and their short-lived romance changes everyone around them. This particular revival, however, simply does not come together to successfully express the depth in its story. The lack of solid direction combined with weak performances drag down the show's power.

Luckily, the show contains fleeting moments of promise that keep it from missing its mark altogether. If Stain wanted to create a series of dance numbers put together with some little bits of dialogue and song, then he succeeded. His revival may not embody the intensity of previous productions, but it still manages to entertain.