

Theater: "Hunchback" Sings; Ibsen Stuck in Stone For "Posterity"

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THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME ** out of ****

POSTERITY * 1/2 out of ****

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PAPERMILL PLAYHOUSE

This musical version of Victor Hugo's sprawling melodrama has had its eye on Broadway ever since James Lapine turned the Disney animated film into live theater for Germany back in the 1990s. After many years and much tinkering, I'm afraid a happy ending on Broadway is as unlikely as a happy ending for the disfigured Quasimodo. But it isn't for lack of trying: the show boasts truly excellent singing from its four leads, huge vocal support from the Continuo Arts Symphonic Chorus that certainly adds punch to the show's many, many climactic moments and superior playing from the orchestra conducted by musical director Brent-Alan Huffman. Quite simply, this work could not ask for a better showcase. The many failings on display are strictly its own.

For all the Les Miz-like sprawl on display, the story is simple and can be quickly reduced to three men all in love -- to varying degrees -- with one woman. The religious leader of the Church of Notre Dame is Dom Claude Frollo (Patrick Page). He's always been drawn to a life of strict denial, perhaps in response to his wayward brother Jehan. The more fun-loving Jehan (a memorable Jeremy Stolle in a small role) falls in love with a gypsy, is banished from their home in Notre Dame and dies, leaving only the deformed child Quasimodo. Frollo raises the boy in the belfry with a confused mixture of love and sternness, seeing the child's outward ugliness as a sign of Jehan's sin.

They are both bewitched by the gypsy Esmerelda (Ciara Renée), who enters Paris for the annual Festival of Fools. Esmerelda (Ciara Renee) is kind to the now-adult hunchback (Michael Arden), wary of the feverishly enraptured Frollo and flirty with the handsome new Captain of the Guards Phoebus (Andrew Samonsky). Frollo becomes more and more obsessed with this gypsy -- this reminder of his brother's fall -- and he is determined somehow to have her carnally and save her soul. Since both are hardly possible, it's no surprise when he turns on her, damns Esmerelda as a witch and rouses the guards to hunt her down and burn her at the stake. It falls to Quasimodo to claim "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!" by swinging into action, rescuing the beautiful and sweet woman and taking her to his home in the belfry, holding off seemingly all of Paris in the process. Oh, and there's a lot of singing.

Needless to say, it doesn't end well. This version retains most of the songs written by Stephen Schwartz and Alan Menken for the film, including some which weren't even originally used. It has a new book by Peter Parnell and a great deal of sound and fury. Seemingly every other scene ends with a clamor; when you've got lots of bells and a full choir on stage, the temptation to use it all is resisted about as well as Frolo's desire for flesh. He punishes the gypsy girl; the show punishes us by starting at full volume and never stopping. Subtlety was never really called for in a melodrama like this. But when not seeming like a poor cousin to Les Miserables, the show feels like all peaks and no valleys.

The two romantic leads are cardboard cutouts on paper. Renée adds some genuine charm as Esmerelda but

Samonsky feels resolutely modern as Phoebus. Patrick Page fares much better as the conflicted Frolo but it's almost entirely to his presence. Certainly would-be big numbers like "Hellfire" add nothing to his role. Indeed, all the songs blend together, whether rousing openers like "The Bells Of Notre Dame," tunes of yearning like "Out There" or romantic ballads like "Someday." Those who are musically inclined will appreciate the complexity of the score, the motifs for characters that are repeated throughout and the Latin choral work drawing on classic religious melodies for the act two curtain raiser. But no one will be singing them. There's a reason the film has not earned its place in the Disney canon.

Certainly the staging doesn't help. The scenic design by Alexander Dodge manages to be both very busy, even cluttered really in the margins while almost non-existent for the main action. It's the worst of both worlds, with countless stairs and ramps leading to nowhere interesting but just a few pieces of removable railing to suggest the soaring balcony high above Paris. (When Quasimodo straddles one and scares Esmerelda by pretending to fall, I was a little worried too since it was so rickety the railing trembled.)

But *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame* truly falls apart with a shocking lack of theatrical imagination at the finale. Anyone who has seen the various feature film and TV movie versions (notably Charles Laughton in the greatest of them all from 1939) will remember that action-packed climax. Quasimodo swoops in to rescue Esmerelda, scales the walls of Notre Dame and pours boiling oil from the belfry to ward off attackers among other derring-do. If you can't think of an interesting, theatrically exciting way to do this finale, why would you stage it at all?

Instead, this show mostly just stops and describes what happens during the final pages of the book. As in having a chorus member step forward and say, "And then Quasimodo..." Ludicrously, when the hunchback is scaling the outside wall, this is illustrated by having actors "pose" as the wall and having Quasimodo weave in and out of them as he walks across the stage. It looks more like he's wandering a garden maze and of course it takes place from stage right to stage left when what you want is to have Quasimodo descend or ascend a great height.

Similarly, the boiling pitch is banally and ineffectively depicted as a silky banner while the throwing of a body from the belfry -- the emotional peak of the story -- is also very poorly handled. All of this constitutes what should be a crescendo of action after two hours of mostly internal strife. Instead it's quite bereft of any theatrical magic from director Scott Schwartz and his creative team; the climax is the first thing they should have tackled and solved but in fact they never came close to figuring it out. Not helping matters is the mawkish, misguided flourish at the "Finale Ultimo" in which the chorus insists that there is literally a little Quasimodo in all of us. (The only theatrical magic to be found at all is a modest but effective bit in which a beheaded statue talks to Quasimodo; it's simple but engaging.)

So stick figure characters, unmemorable songs and a bungled climax. What should be an utter failure is actually watchable thanks to the assembled cast. Page holds the stage throughout and makes you believe in his turmoil even when the writing and songs give him little to work with. Stolle was distinctive enough as his brother to leave a memory of that man an effective touchstone for the rest of the show. (Stolle certainly deserved more than a credit as "Ensemble" in his bio for this small part.) Joseph J. Simeone is a stand-out in the hardworking chorus. The music is too insistent but it's sung powerfully and played beautifully, thanks to the trio of musical supervisor Michael Kosarin, orchestrator Michael Starobin and music director and conductor Huffman. They do sterling work.

That leaves Quasimodo, played by Michael Arden. I can't call it a star-making turn because the role isn't remotely good enough. Besides, there's not enough Quasimodo in the show. The character almost disappears for chunks of time in a musical that is, after all, named for him. Nonetheless, Arden makes a strong impression, from the opener -- where the handsome but approachable Arden is transformed onstage via a few modest touches into Quasimodo -- right to the finale.

He keeps this easily cliched character from slipping into bathos, letting only a few modest fawning gestures towards Frodo tell us what we need to know about this beaten-down fellow. When alone, Quasimodo stands a little taller and belts out in a truly beautiful and powerful voice. When other characters are present, he sinks down lower and sings more awkwardly, meaning Arden transitions back and forth throughout the show, giving varied shadings to his speaking and singing based on Quasimodo's emotional state. He never belabors the point or calls attention to it; both as actor and singer, Arden is excellent.

The show asks about the difference between a monster and a man. Which leads one to ask, what's the difference between a talented actor and a star? A great role in a great show, I think. Hopefully Arden will land one soon.

POSTERITY * 1/2 out of ****

ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY AT LINDA GROSS THEATER

Plays about famous artists crossing paths with one another (or with artists we know will fade into obscurity) are irresistible to playwrights, apparently. Whether these meetings are real or imagined, thoroughly documented or left to the imagination, you know that Art will be discussed and debated, chuckles drawn from now-dated comments like "Movies are a fad and will soon disappear!" or some such thing and the judgement of History hangs heavy.

All the pitfalls of such endeavors are unfortunately present in *Posterity*, the new drama written and directed by Pulitzer Prize winner Doug Wright. It boils down to two main scenes.

In one, sculptor Gustav Vigeland (Hamish Linklater) is on the brink of securing a commission to create his masterwork. (He will ultimately become Norway's most famous sculptor.) However, in order to gain this opportunity he must convince the towering, world famous, aging but obstinate playwright Henrik Ibsen to sit for one final bust, a concrete expression of his fame. They fence intellectually, playfully and fiercely, with Vigeland seizing on everything from flattery to insult to suggesting history will forget him in an effort to bend the unbending Ibsen.

In the second scene, sudden illness has prompted a death watch at the great man's home while Ibsen musters the strength for a sitting that soon turns into a confession of his many personal failings.

Ultimately, neither scene truly works.

Like the show, technical elements are spotty. Derek McLane's set for the working studio of Vigeland is gorgeous and convincing, with soft lighting from David Lander adding immeasurably to the effect. The costumes by Susan Hilferty are similarly on target.

However, a switch to the home of Ibsen is rather bizarrely handled in act two. Suddenly, for no discernible reason, three large oil paintings are brought out and arrayed across the front of the stage, all of them portraits. One might think they were portraits of Ibsen, Vigeland and Vigeland's manager Sophus Larpent (Henry Stram). Who else could they be? But since they are soon placed on the walls of Ibsen's home, clearly it couldn't be the latter two. But why are they paraded out and placed in front of us? A spotlight is focused on one and then the other and then the other. Why? Is it to distract us from the set change taking place? Whatever the reason, their mysterious appearance in such prominent positions at such a key moment, never to be referenced again, was puzzling to say the least.

Worse was the incidental scene-setting music of David Van Tieghem (who also did the fine sound design). It's melodramatic and ponderous in the extreme, emphasizing and calling attention to the weakest elements of the show. No music is needed and the little offered here unfortunately weighed down an already shaky show.

Dale Soules and Mickey Theis are saddled with unfortunate minor characters. Soules has a speech at the very

start where this elderly domestic mocks her penny pinching employer. Soules I sense is a fine actor doing her best in a poor part. But it's the sort of scene opener that immediately makes clear this show will hit mostly false notes. You don't buy this woman who has a husband and child dependent on her would speak out so mockingly when her job is at stake; indeed she never shows similar spunk the rest of the evening. So it's entirely out of character and unconvincing. Soules is not at fault, though. This however is woefully miscast as Vigeland's assistant. He may be one of those actors who simply doesn't convince in period pieces. It surely doesn't help that his role is a muddle as well.

Every time these two take center stage we feel the play is killing time until the inevitable showdown between the sculptor and the playwright. We simply don't care about them and the play never gives us a reason to do so or even a reason to accept them as real. Stram has it little better as the patron/manager (another ill-defined character in a show with only five). Stram is a pro and at least creates the illusion of one for a while.

So we're down to those two sparring sessions. In the first, Linklater seemed rushed and uncertain the night I attended. He's one of my favorite actors and I felt Linklater was trying to gin up some emotion, some enthusiasm for this tired debate about Art and Life and Posterity. The writing just wasn't there and he knew it or at least sensed something was missing and struggled to bring it to life.

Noble fared much better in that first scene. He entered and the restless audience immediately sat up straight. The silly simpering of the servants wasn't needed for us to understand: this is a formidable man. Noble commanded attention by simple force of will. With two such skilled actors, it was inevitable that even this forced exchange of philosophies would be somewhat entertaining. But it fell into a predictable rhythm right down to a joke about James Joyce. (It's this show's equivalent of "Cars will never replace horses".)

Noble certainly hoped for better in their second scene, which has a long, soul-baring monologue for the frosty, proud Ibsen. He does a marvelous job physically as the broken down man who hears the beating wings of Death (as we're told repeatedly). But that monologue is too clearly a Monologue and goes on too long. Or to be more accurate, isn't interesting and varied enough to sustain our interest for the time it lasts. The details of his revealed flaws are at first poignant but become maudlin after Wright drags out the moment well past its breaking point. Poor Linklater is reduced to murmuring the occasional "Yes" and "Mm-hmm" as Ibsen goes on and on, though Noble brings what dignity and dramatic powers he can to bear.

That scene is modestly effective if attenuated...and then Posterity spoils whatever glow Noble and Linklater give it with a final plot twist that is pure, unearned bathos. One needn't wait for the judgment of posterity to know this isn't one for the ages.

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