

Beauty and the Beast @ The Muny

Music by Alan Menken

Lyrics by Howard Ashman and Tim Rice

Book by Linda Woolverton

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Longtime readers of this blog would know that my all-time favorite Disney movie is *Mary Poppins*. But if you were to ask me what my favorite animated Disney movie was, as well as my favorite Disney fairy tale, it would definitely have to be *Beauty and the Beast*. It's one of the few movies I think is absolutely perfect: the characters, the writing, the songs, the animation – it was the first animated film to be nominated for Best Picture, do I have to say anything more? The stage adaptation happens to be the first venture by Disney Theatricals, and it kind of shows considering how faithful it is to the film, almost to the letter. But I don't care, because the show is an absolute triumph of stagecraft and spectacle, especially on a stage as massive as the Muny.

"Once upon a time, in a far-off kingdom," a prince who had no kindness in his heart was transformed into a hideous beast by a powerful enchantress as punishment for his cruelty. The Beast is then given a magic mirror that lets him see into the outside world, as well as a magic rose that is slowly withering away. If the Beast can learn how to love and be loved in return before all of the petals fall, he'll become human again. Thus, we meet Belle. She's a bright, beautiful young woman who is considered the oddball of her poor provincial village purely because she's an attractive woman who loves to read. Belle has even become the object of attraction by Gaston, the local hunter and town hero that everyone aspires to be. Like Belle, Gaston is also good-looking, but is totally self-obsessed and only wants to be with Belle for her beauty alone. Belle's love for reading and yearn for adventure come from her supportive father Maurice, the local inventor who everyone thinks is crazy. One day, Maurice heads away from home when he happens upon the Beast's castle. The Beast accuses Maurice of trespassing and throws him into the dungeon, where Belle finds him later. She decides to let the Beast take her as his prisoner instead and set Maurice free. At first, the Beast sees this as his chance to fall in love, but then we discover that he is, well, downright beastly and does treat Belle as a prisoner. However, after a series of well-placed events, Belle and the Beast start to see the good in one another. They both lower their guard and inevitably fall in love, leading to Gaston and his angry mob of close-minded villagers to try and tear them apart.

Beauty and the Beast has become a Muny staple – this is their fourth time producing it within the last 20 years. It's a story that strikes a chord with so many people, myself included. I think everybody loves *Beauty and the Beast* so much because it's the epitome of the classic Disney fairy tale, but with a couple twists that feel organic to the story rather than self-deprecating (I'm looking at you, *Frozen*). For example, the romantic leads don't fall in love at first sight, they actually take a considerable amount of time to do so after their awful first impressions. On top of that, their antagonist, Gaston, is not just a straight-up evil villain, he's a much more realistic

archetype of a privileged man who constantly fails to get what he wants and resorts to desperate measures.

However, I think *Beauty and the Beast* succeeds specifically because of Belle, one of my personal favorite fictional characters ever. She is the perfect role model for young children: she's kind, she's intelligent, she's humble, she doesn't care what others think of her, she has clear boundaries that she refuses to let anyone break, and she's always yearning to be a part of something that is greater than herself – something that even she can't quite comprehend. Belle is an incredibly complex character, a complexity that is matched in the Munny's production by actor Ashley Blanchet. Her performance, even for a *Beauty and the Beast* fanboy like me, is refreshing; Blanchet does not play Belle as a Mary Sue with no depth, hers is a rebellious, spunky, sassy Belle, while simultaneously displaying the qualities that make Belle so great. It's a balance that is really hard to strike, but Blanchet hits it on the head.

Ben Crawford gives the most childlike interpretation of the Beast I've seen yet, and it works. Crawford's swings between bratty, imposing viciousness and wide-eyed, naïve innocence gives depth to the Beast's emotional journey. Crawford's rapport with Blanchet's Belle is great to watch. Claybourne Elder is utterly convincing as the pig-headed Gaston; he is evenly matched by Tommy Bracco as his bumbling sidekick LeFou. Harrison White gives a charming, tender performance as the eccentric Maurice. Also excellent are the ensemble of the Beast's servants: a crew of half-human, half-furniture hybrids that were placed under the same curse as he was. Eric Jordan Young plays Cogsworth the uptight majordomo/clock; Kelvin Moon Loh is Lumiere the eager valet/candelabra; Holly Ann Butler is Babette the saucy maid/feather duster; Ann Harada is Mrs. Potts the shrill head chef/teapot; Michael Hobin is Chip, Mrs. Potts's adorable teacup son; and Debby Lennon is Madame de la Grande Bouche, the castle's excitable opera diva/wardrobe.

Director John Tartaglia embraces a more theatrical approach that lets the show stand as its own separate entity from the film. This includes tapping into his roots as a puppeteer, utilizing a liberal amount of puppet characters – Chip the teacup, the utensils in "Be Our Guest," the wolves in the woods, and even the castle's dog/ottoman. All of these puppets are brought to dazzling life by designers Andy Manjuck and Dorothy James. Tartaglia leads an army of 85 actors all performing Patrick O'Neill's energetic choreography, accompanied by the magnificent Munny Orchestra conducted by Ben Whiteley.

The thoughtfulness of Tartaglia's vision is clearly communicated by the show's production values; with the exception of one or two jarring technical moments, the visuals are wonderful. The big standouts of the show are Robin McGee's intricately detailed costumes, Ashley Rae Callahan's technical hair and makeup, and Jason Lyons's eye-popping lighting design featuring some impressive pyrotechnic work. Ann Beyersdorfer's sets, Greg Emetaz's video design, and John Shivers and David Patridge's sound design provide a storybook atmosphere that is classic Disney.

Is there really any good conclusion I can come to about the Muny's *Beauty and the Beast*? You know how great the songs are, you know how wonderful the characters are, you know how spellbinding the stagecraft is – it's just a flawless show. *Beauty and the Beast* is one of those musicals that gets better every single time I see it. At the Muny, we get treated to a Disney fairy tale done at its absolute best by a theatre at the top of its game. I would say go and see it, but let's face it, you already have.