

## **Little Shop of Horrors @ The Muny**

Music by Alan Menken

Lyrics and Book by Howard Ashman

Based on the film by Roger Corman and Charles Griffth

Ran July 25 - 31, 2023 @ The Muny

### **Published August 7, 2023**

I started taking my fandom for musical theatre seriously in the ninth grade. That year, I served as a lighting technician for my high school's production of *Little Shop of Horrors*, the first musical I've ever been involved with, production-wise. Coinciding with my discovery of *Urinetown*, *Little Shop* opened my mind to just how varied and diverse musical theatre can be as an art form. I have never seen *Little Shop* live since that production (*12 years ago!*), so when the Muny announced they were producing it, I was curious to see how this small-scale show was to fit their gigantic stage. Let me tell you, folks, just like they did with last year's *Camelot*, they made it work.

Based on the 1960 low-budget horror film of the same name (which featured the cinematic debut of Jack Nicholson, by the by), *Little Shop of Horrors* centers around Seymour Krelborne, the adult ward of the neglectful, curmudgeonly florist Mr. Mushnik. His life as an orphan in the rundown neighborhood of Skid Row has Seymour taking refuge in botany, becoming what I call – with all the affection in the world – a big dumb nerd. In want of escape from Skid Row, Seymour pines after his co-worker Audrey, who is in an abusive relationship with the sadistic dentist Orin Scrivello, DDS (*you can't forget his title!*). One day, a total eclipse of the sun brings unto Seymour a “strange and unusual plant” that he dubs the “Audrey II”. When Seymour places Audrey II, or “Twoie” for short, in the shop window, its odd appearance draws in more customers to the struggling florist. At first, Twoie's presence is seen as a welcome addition, but Seymour soon discovers that Twoie can only grow and thrive when it feeds on human blood. From here, a chain of events occurs that earns Seymour great success but threatens not only his own life but those of the people around him and eventually the entire world.

Obviously, *Little Shop of Horrors* is a variation of the Faust story, told as a satire of classic B-grade horror movies. But I think *Little Shop* has endured for the last 40 years because Alan Menken and Howard Ashman did not fall for the metaphorical flytrap of camp or low comedy. The show is written with an almost childlike simplicity that is surprisingly genuine and intensely sincere. Despite the comedy, *Little Shop* is a high-stakes thriller about an evil entity exploiting humanity's greatest weaknesses in order to conquer us, which is especially timely now (*AI takeover, anybody?*). There are too many productions that misunderstand *Little Shop*, tumbling head-over-ass into the same pitfalls as bad productions of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*.

Even though the Muny had to scale up the show's size, their *Little Shop of Horrors* does not do anything to detract from the reality of the story, thanks to the leadership of director Maggie

Burrows. In collaboration with Burrows, choreographer William Carlos Angulo and musical director Andrew Graham infuse the show with a snap and zest that feels exceedingly comfortable here. Their creative team fully transports us to Skid Row, starting with Kristen Robinson's finely detailed set and Greg Emetaz's evocative video design, complete with crumbling facades, dingy interiors, and fading signs that subtly change when everyone's fortunes do. The costumes by Leon Dobkowski and hair and makeup by Kelley Jordan are marvelous, as are Rob Denton's lights and John Shivers and David Patridge's sound.

The cast for this production is small by Muny standards, but their performances are big, strong, and brimming with energy: Robin de Jesús as Seymour, Patti Murin as Audrey, Michael McGrath as Mushnik, and Ryan Vasquez as Orin and a whole bunch of other roles. The show's Greek chorus of street urchins is also stellar: Kennedy Holmes as Crystal, Taylor Marie Daniel as Chiffon, and Stephanie Gomérez as Ronnette. Special attention must be paid to Audrey II herself: puppet designer James Ortiz crafted a Twoie specifically tailored for this production, and it's one of the most creative designs I've seen yet. This Twoie consists of independently moving leaves and vines that form a typical flytrap, operated by three puppeteers. Much like H.R. Giger designing the Xenomorphs, Twoie's leaves form a secondary head around a roving pod that serves as the mouthpiece, operated with sharp precision by Travis Patton. These four puppeteers work in tandem with voice performer Nicholas Ward to create an Audrey II that fills the entire stage in a way I haven't seen from any other production of *Little Shop*, not even my high school one.

*Little Shop of Horrors* is one of those musicals that will always have a special place in my heart, and it will definitely not be the last time I see this show in St. Louis. I'm glad, too, that the Muny embraced the vastness of the stage rather than trying to hide it, giving room for some technical wizardry the likes of which I haven't seen before. I cannot wait to see what theatrical experiment the Muny tackles next. If we're lucky, it shouldn't be too far away...