

Triassic Parq @ Stray Dog Theatre

Music by Marshall Paillet

Lyrics and Book by Marshall Paillet, Bryce Norbitz, and Steve Wargo

Running April 14 - 30, 2022 @ Tower Grove Abbey

Review Published April 20, 2022

With the release of Jurassic World: Dominion on the horizon, Stray Dog Theatre has given us a comical sendup to the dinosaur-themed films: Triassic Parq. The “Triassic” in the title, I can understand, but “Parq”? According to the cast album, the “Q” at the end of “Parq” stands for “Question”; as in, the question of what really happened to the dinosaurs of Jurassic Park. It’s a great idea, to tell such an iconic story in a way we haven’t seen before. Unfortunately, the “question” bit in the cast album is woefully left out of the licensed version. In fact, the whole reason for the title change is acknowledged in a throw-away lyric rather than a comic monologue. I won’t lie, Triassic Parq kind of threw me for a loop, and not in a good way.

Before seeing the Stray Dog production, I listened to the cast album of the original 2010 Off-Broadway production, so I was shocked to find out that the opening numbers are completely different from each other. The album’s opener, “Velociraptor in a Cage,” was an intense, atmospheric punk-rock song about the rage and heartbreak of being a genetically engineered animal that is treated like they’re nothing. The opener we do get, “Welcome to Triassic Parq,” serves the purpose of being a recap of the first film and the roll call for the characters, done in the style of an uptempo musical comedy number. No ambience to be seen nor any punk to be heard. Again, I will not lie, the album did a much better job of firmly setting the punk tone. But even then, the rest of the material doesn’t follow through in this regard.

The score for Triassic Parq is a mixed bag, utilizing punk, piano ballad, uptempo musical theatre, even rap. However, what gets me about the score is that everything about the show’s premise and aesthetic leads me to believe that it is a punk rock musical, but it’s not – and it really frustrates me. Even the book scenes are reminiscent of SNL sketches, which is fine, but doesn’t lend itself well to this particular story, even if it is a parody.

For all two of you who haven’t seen it, Jurassic Park centers around a theme park that serves as a biological reserve for genetic clones of dinosaurs. But the clones weren’t perfect, so the engineers used the DNA of frogs to fill the gaps in the dinosaurs’ genetic code. In doing so, the dinosaur clones inherited the trait of some amphibians to change sex during their life cycle. Once this change was discovered amongst the dinosaurs, who were originally all female, unauthorized breeding began to occur, and the lives of the people who made Jurassic Park possible were hung in the balance. Triassic Parq focuses on the dinosaurs’ reaction to discovering this change within themselves.

The start of the show establishes that the dinos have created their own tribe, complete with their own religion, beliefs, and myths about why they have been created and why they are all females. Even the characters all have label names akin to a morality play: the spiritual leader is

the Velociraptor of Faith, the dissenter is the Velociraptor of Science, and the mediator is the Velociraptor of Innocence. This is not the case for the T-Rexes, who are each called T-Rex 1 and T-Rex 2 (though T-Rex 1 was eventually given the name Kaitlyn for some reason that is never explained). There's also a Mime-A-Saurus who serves as a silent stagehand, like The Mute in *The Fantasticks*; they play a goat, a cow, a rock, a lazy river, anything the scene demands. The characters also interact with the production's three-piece rock band, led by Pianosaurus, who is often the butt of many jokes from the characters (the reason why Pianosaurus is hated in this way, they never explain. And I do mean never). And also Morgan Freeman is here. He only shows up in the opening number. And he sexually harasses a random audience member. And then he's eaten offstage by the T-Rexes. I digress.

When T-Rex 2 develops a secondary sex characteristic, Faith exiles her, fearing she may destroy the tribe. It's pretty similar to how religious leaders are attacking people in the LGBT+ community today. The rest of the show is Innocence and T-Rex 1 trying to find both T-Rex 2 and Science so that they can find out the answer to the question of who they are and why they exist.

I consider *Triassic Parq* to be the older cousin of *Head Over Heels*, since both musicals are comedies that upend our assumptions of both sex and gender identity, and they explore how they intersect with a religious, God-fearing society's expectations about what sex and gender identity should be. But I think *Triassic Parq* walked so that *Head Over Heels* could run. *Head Over Heels* is a much more sophisticated musical comedy – the songs, the characters, and the aesthetic were all developed for the purpose of serving the material, an obscure 16th-century romance novel. *Triassic Parq* is a show that throws everything at the wall to see what sticks. It's the kind of show where the sum of its parts is greater than the whole. The songs, the characters, the jokes, and the sensibilities exist more to entertain the writers of the show than to serve *Jurassic Park*, which is one of my all-time favorite films.

Despite the shortcomings of the material, the *Stray Dog* production does deliver on the atmosphere and the comedy – they've actually gotten me to belly laugh quite a few times at moments that would probably flop in the hands of a less capable crew. Director Justin Been infuses the show with a cartoonish energy that makes the 90-minute show go by at a rapid clip. The movement is assisted by Michael Hodges's choreography that is capably performed by a multi-gendered cast of highly accomplished local actors: Tristan Davis as Innocence, Michael Wells as Faith, Laurell Stevenson as both Science and Morgan Freeman, Dawn Schmid as T-Rex 1, Rachel Bailey as T-Rex 2, and Bryce Miller as Mime-A-Saurus. The songs are also performed well, accompanied by the excellent *Triassic Parq* Band led by musical director Leah Schultz as Pianosaurus, featuring Adam Rugo as Guitaratops and Joe Winters as Drumadon.

The production values are also great, and it was what led me to believe that the material was going to follow through on it being a punk rock musical. Josh Smith's versatile scenic design utilizes the height of the Tower Grove Abbey stage, conveying the vastness of the island as well as making the fence impressively huge. Eileen Engel's costumes are bright, colorful, just the right amount of punk, and complete with reptilian phalluses. Contributing well to the island's

ambience is Tyler Duenow's lights, Justin Been's sound, and the props designed by Been and Gary F. Bell.

Triassic Parq disappoints me because the concept behind the show is quite brilliant. If the entire score had been written in the punk idiom, it could have made for a really brave, really heartfelt satire of today's gender politics. But the show we actually get is just half-assed dick jokes and half-baked philosophy that never fully explores the obstacles that come with being a transgendered person, nor does it make any bold claims about respecting LGBT+ people outside of stating the importance of community. To paraphrase Ian Malcolm, "the lack of humility before your target audience truly astounds me." Triassic Parq is a musical that I would only suggest seeing if you are curious to see a show that is not seen very often. Just be prepared to get a drink from the always-open cash bar, because trust me when I say that you'll need one to get through this.