

Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* – Theatre Review: Arizona Broadway Theatre, Peoria

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You'd think after the popularity of the 1991 animated musical, then all the anniversary home entertainment formats, the 1994 Broadway musical, the national tours (not one but four), the regional productions, the high-school adapted productions, then this year's mammoth, global hit of a live-action movie musical, whoever was interested in seeing Disney's **Beauty and the Beast** would have already seen it in one form or another, and had seen it several times. Yet, on the evidence of this past weekend's packed house at **Arizona Broadway Theatre** in Peoria, the piece remains as magical at the box-office as it appears on stage; in fact, in any format. The tale as old as time will continue to be told time and time again, and there's just no stopping it.

What may surprise those who leapt to their feet and applauded with wild enthusiasm at **ABT** is this: When the show first opened in '94, the reviews were harsh. The musical garnered nine Tony nominations, but won only one (Best Costume Design), and **The New York Times** criticized the show as simply a tourist attraction; one that resembled little more than a production ready for regional dinner theatre. The irony here, of course, is that **ABT** is a dinner theatre, and its production may well resemble the version currently in development for tourists who'll be cruising aboard the Disney Dream vessel this November, but so what? The snark of Broadway press bemoaning a lack of great theatre on the Great White Way is a Manhattan issue. In a vibrant theatrical community such as here in the valley, the point is moot; there is room for all. True, the musical really isn't great theatre in the way that **Fiddler on the Roof**, **West Side Story**, or **Cabaret** is, but its surface sparkle, its glitz, and its sugar-coated, fairy tale concoction has proved irresistible; it's a crowd-pleaser on a grand scale, and if **ABT** knows anything, its how to present a crowd-pleaser and make it shine.



With **ABT's Beauty and the Beast**, even before the show begins and you're putting down your knife and fork, you'll be struck by how effective the look of the towering, bricked, castle turrets appear, paraded either side of the stage. They flank a forest painted **scrim**, that special type of theatrical fabric which with special lighting can suddenly become translucent and, like a magic trick, reveal sights and characters you never knew were there, standing behind it.

During the introduction where the Enchantress (Hannah Fairman) pretending to be an old beggar woman offers the prince (Tony Edgerton) a single rose in exchange for shelter, then curses him with the look of a beast when he rejects her, the sequence is played out from behind that scrim, the characters revealed in ghostly lighting as images appear then fade before us. It's as if we're watching a dream. Then Belle (a thoroughly delightful and engaging Jill-Christine Wiley) appears, already there in the center of the small, provincial town, greeting the new day, as everyone in the French village is getting ready to declare, "*Bonjour!*" The lighting brightens to a daylight setting, the scrim rises, and we're suddenly there, right in the middle of town, with painted flats of the town's buildings standing up-stage, resembling the 3D pop-up look of a child's fairy tale book. It's a great opening.



Paul A Black's set design continues to transport, particularly in the way the Beast's castle slides from either side on stage, then twists and turns, and pieces together at different angles, forming various areas of the

Gothic looking setting, whether it be the doorway opening, the bedrooms, the hallways, or the towering West Wing that houses the ever-important rose in its glass casing.

The show can also boast a great cast with outstanding voices. In addition to Wiley's thoroughly pleasing Belle and Edgerton's terrific hairy beast, there's great support from Christopher Michaels as LeFou who, in both sight and sound, is a dead-ringer for his animated counterpart; TJ Nelson's Gaston, whose pronunciation of *rendezvous* as *ren-dayz-vooz* is all the funnier when you know he's *supposed* to be talking French; and Jon Gentry as Belle's eccentric father Maurice who makes his entrance on a wheeled contraption that could well have been a left-over invention from Caractacus Potts.



But what works really well in the show is how the musical has enlarged upon the characters of the enchanted castle servants, doomed by the Enchantress to become living figurines along with their cursed beast of a master (which, personally speaking, always seemed rather mean-spirited of the woman). All of them are presented with a lot more personality and conflict than either the animated or the live-action feature had them, and in **ABT**'s production, all performers excel, particularly Zachary Spiegel's fussy Cogsworth the mantle clock, and Ben Stasny's Lumiere, the candelabra whose outrageous French accent is less Maurice Chevalier and more Inspector Clouseau.

As Mrs. Potts the teapot, Gerri Weagraff's rendition of the romantic, titular song is every bit as delicate and as charming as Angela Lansbury's original, whose singing voice Weagraff faintly echoes. Eleonore S. Thomas as the operatic singing wardrobe lives up to her name of Madame de la Grande Bouche (it means 'she of the big mouth,' or perhaps, more politely in Thomas' case, the *great* mouth). Even Babette, the feather duster, has more to say and do in the show than she did in either of the films, played with all the fun and sauciness of a flirty French castle maid by Melissa Jones. The young teacup, Chip is shared on different nights by Corban Adams and Corinne Seaver.



Plus, those three women usually portrayed as Gaston's groupies, swooning in the background, have a lot more to do and say in the live musical. Billed as the three Silly Girls, as played with near pantomime, lusty, comical broadness with a touch of arm-pulling slapstick by Hannah Fairman, Renee Kathleen Koher and Lauren Morgan, they're more like the Three Female Stooges, and they're fun every time they appear.

Music director Adam Berger does a tremendous job of making a seven-piece band sound more like a full orchestra pit, while Kurtis W. Overby's choreography livens those big production songs. In truth, there's a certain lack of spectacle in some of the larger numbers, particularly with **Be Our Guest** where local theatrical invention appears somewhat scaled back, but what those sequences lack in the glitzy magnitude that Broadway offered is compensated by the energy and invention of Overby's steps. The beer swigging lineup to **Gaston** is a standout, though you might question Belle's inclusion with the dancers in **Be Our Guest**. True, the show has always had her joining in with the high-energy sequence, but you have to ask, would the world's most charming and demure girl-next-door really raise her skirt, kick her heels up quite as high, and reveal those French undies with the same enthusiasm and exuberance as the professional Can-Can dancers? I'm thinking no.



As with the theatre's earlier presentation of Disney's **The Little Mermaid**, there's an opportunity after the musical to have your family take pictures with members of the cast still in character in the lobby. Perhaps,

just as those New York reviews were only too willing to point out, **Beauty and the Beast** isn't groundbreaking theatre, and maybe those bewigged, animated-inspired characters are best seen when riding by them in a theme park cart rather than on a Broadway stage, but that's New York. As presented here at **ABT**, it's a great night for a family outing. And if it's the first time your child has seen a musical as sparkling and as colorful as this and it inspires a new generation to return and see more kinds of theatre, then in its way, the musical is ultimately just as important as any other Broadway show.

Pictures Courtesy of **Arizona Broadway Theatre**

Also note that this production of Disney's **Beauty and the Beast** will move to **Herberger Theater Center** in downtown Phoenix, July 7-16

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