

Clarence Brown Theatre Stages Brisk, Enthusiastic “Little Shop of Horrors”

By Bonnie Appetit / Metropulse

Wednesday, November 4, 2009

The partnership of Howard Ashman and Alan Menken may perhaps be best remembered for almost single-handedly rescuing the Disney brand from its seemingly-terminal 1980s slump, but arguably the two never produced anything more charming or complete than their collaboration on *Little Shop of Horrors*, a uniquely improbable adaptation of a 1960 Roger Corman flick featuring a man-eating plant.

The result is an almost perfect piece of musical theater, and proof that Ashman and Menken could, with some nuanced phrasing, be mentioned in the same sentence as Lerner and Loewe, Rodgers and Hart, and the Gershwins. Menken, of course, went on to win a shelf-buckling eight Oscars, while Ashman, on the other hand, was dead at 40, another victim of that particularly spiteful strain of HIV that so brutally decimated an august generation of New York theatrical brilliance.

The Carousel Theatre, easily Knoxville's best performing space, proves the ideal venue for Terry Silver-Alford's brisk and enthusiastic staging of the show. The immaculate-sounding house band, ably lead by James Brimer, is as supple and bouncy as a squash ball behind Kerry Lee Chipman's delightful set. Both elements lend a controlled, capable plushness to the evening.

Perhaps fittingly for a show based on a B-movie, the University of Tennessee theater department fields what is almost exclusively a B-team for the production, drawn from its undergraduate population. With the exception of some extremely optimistic casting in the minor roles, the company acquits itself with competence and, occasionally, flair.

The safest pair of hands belong to Clarence Brown Artist-in-Residence David Kortemeier who, as Mushnik the hangdog florist, maintains his hopeless slouch even as the shop's fortunes soar. Blessed with a great voice and a sure comic touch, Kortemeier is never less than splendidly watchable. Youngster Mitch Miller as nerdy apprentice Seymour displays a pleasing winsomeness as he is tortured in turns by despair, ambition, and remorse, forced in his Faustian compact to feed ever-more loveable associates to the botanical maw. He does, however, garble the best-written lyric sequence in the show — “What we have here is an ethical dilemma” — depriving the audience of a literary construction worthy of W.S. Gilbert.

Every bit Miller's match is Lindsey Jenné Hansom as Audrey, a brittle, screeching, yet nonetheless hugely sympathetic blonde whose longing for suburban mediocrity is equalled only by her capacity to gratefully absorb the sadism of her dentist boyfriend. Hansom's is one of the finest singing voices of the night, and in “Suddenly Seymour” we are given a surprisingly moving ballad that transcends the emotional limits of its ironic, schlocky context.

The true star, naturally, is the plant itself, resplendent in its ever-increasing dimensions and looking for all the world like the creature from *Alien* as refashioned by Jim Henson. The plant is not merely good-looking; it also boasts in Brandon Gibson a voice that is anything but weedy. Gibson, invisible though he is, commands the stage with a richly comedic Isaac Hayes-like baritone. Gloriously operated by puppeteers Patrick Ryan Kimberlin and Zachary Parker, the plant personifies the witty, triumphant absurdity of the show, defying even the most cynical of audiences not to feel warm and benign about the whole enterprise.