

Written by Mike Schulz

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*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, currently being presented at the Timber Lake Playhouse, is a little bit *Jesus Christ Superstar*, a little bit Frank Wildhorn, and a whole lotta *Les Miserables*, but it has a narrative structure and momentum that's all its own, and it's continually surprising – I can't recall the last time I felt so

*alert*

at the theatre. (It helps that this musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel is unfamiliar to most of us, having been produced only once before – at the Drury Lane Oakbrook Theatre – in 1994, and having gone through extensive revision since then.)

There's always something inherently silly about musicals based on European literary classics (yes, even *Les Miz* and *Phantom*); it's hard to stifle a giggle when the huddled masses suddenly launch into Broadway-style choreography, or when tormented, deadly serious characters let loose with a sappy pop ballad.

*Hunchback* doesn't quite overcome this built-in predicament, particularly in its use of the poet Gringoire (Adam Henry), who's stuck with the drippiest love songs and comes off as a bit of a drip himself. But the production is still extraordinary. Cheri Coons' and Tom Sivak's score, for the most part, is complex and beautifully composed, featuring some chillingly good harmonies, and Victor Hugo's source material has been treated with just enough reverence by book writer David H. Bell; at no point does this feel like

*Hunchback*

for Dummies. It's a strong, serious work, and it has been wonderfully well-staged by director Brad Lyons.

Much of Lyons' work is, in fact, astonishing. There's a scene in Act II that I can't get out of my head: Esmeralda (Emily Firth), having been wrongly accused of murder, sits, stage left, in a jail cell. Her "trial," meanwhile, is commencing stage right, with the details of Esmeralda's subsequent, hideous torture revealed through narration. (The employment of numerous, alternating narrators, as in the stage version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, is *Hunchback's* greatest inspiration.) We never

*witness*

the torture, thank the gods, but we see it reflected in Esmeralda's face – she's both removed

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from the action and immersed in it simultaneously. Her eyes bespeak the character's unbearable humiliation and pain, and as the haunting music dovetails with the drama, the dichotomy of the two stage pictures is stunning, and feels almost revelatory. Watching this sequence unfold symbolically was far more effective – far more

*moving*

– than if presented literally, and it left me a little shaken.

It wasn't the *only* scene that did. Lyons comes through with magnificent images all throughout *Hunchback*

: Quasimodo (Jeffrey Binney), at age 16, ringing the cathedral bells with heartbreaking elation (the ropes lift him six feet off the ground); the three gossips (Erin Anderson, Ella Mouria Seet, and Victoria Watson, all superb) cackling over the abandoned baby Quasimodo's ugliness while his mother (the lovely, grave Alexandra Ausman) cowers in the background; the French masses, in the Act II climax, marching to face their oppressors while the stage itself revolves. (That finale number, "Arise," is a truly glorious apex.)

*Hunchback*

is a visual feast – the lighting, costumes, and that exquisite set are jaw-droppingly fine – but it's the imagination

*behind*

the visuals that makes the show so memorable.

As you've probably gleaned, *Hunchback* is weighty stuff – Victor Hugo, I'm guessing, wasn't exactly a load of laughs – but the production isn't draining; it doesn't make you want to kill yourself after the curtain call. The show features moments of much-needed levity – Seet and Clay Sanderson, as the King of the Gypsies, are quite amusing – and the ensemble appears to be having a high old time playing the lowlifes; Justin Banta, with a devilish grin and appropriately gruesome make-up, stares down the audience like Private Pyle in

*Full Metal Jacket*. *Hunchback*

is filled with terrific performers who make the heaviness go down smoothly. Andrew Parker Greenwood and Justin Sample are expectedly focused and energetic, Christopher Russell digs deeply into Claude Frollo, creating a fascinatingly monstrous figure, and in the title role, Binney, who rarely speaks and appears less often than you might expect, is achingly effective – a tearjerker in the best sense. (I was thrilled that the writers didn't allow the character to sing; the role hasn't been Disneyfied in the slightest.)

Yet *Hunchback's* trump card is Emily Firth. (I'm checking out my thesaurus here ... nope ... there

*aren't* enough superlatives.) From the moment she opens the show, singing her "Incantation" with devastating clarity and intensity, Firth is spellbinding, a powerhouse performer who emerges as completely *real*.

Esmeralda, who gets the show's best songs (or perhaps Firth just makes it *feel*

that way), is the kind of rich, expansive role that actors push other actors down the stairs to play, and Firth's sense of nuance – coupled with that divine voice – makes her Esmeralda unforgettable. You couldn't imagine better casting, or hope for a better performance.

*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is a huge, thrilling production, a big risk for Timber Lake that

## Notre Damn! An Extraordinary New "Hunchback": "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" at the Timber Lake Playhouse

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has paid off big time. And while it would be a shame to miss the show being performed by this uncommonly fine ensemble, don't fret it if you wanted to see *Hunchback*

but couldn't score tickets – I'm guessing this won't be the last time it'll be produced. You just may have to travel to New York to see it.

*For tickets or more information, visit <http://www.timberlakeplayhouse.org>.*