

The Wonderful World of Disney: Quad City Music Guild's "Beauty & the Beast"

Written by Mike Schulz

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As Belle, the heroine of the Quad City Music Guild's *Beauty & the Beast*, Jenny Winn is a complete cartoon, and I mean that in the best way possible. It's generally thrilling when performers deviate from the expectations associated with a well-known character, but playing a role exactly the way an audience expects it to be played has its own rewards, and in *Beauty & the Beast*

, Winn gives such a flawless approximation of a living-and-breathing animated figure that you might find it impossible not to stare at her with a big, goofy grin plastered on your face.

It's not just that she looks and sounds so right – Winn's bright, clear voice and superb enunciation make her an ideal Disney ingénue – but she has the necessary *spirit*, an intoxicating mixture of intelligence, stubbornness, and unbridled romanticism. Jenny Winn might just be the best thing about this

Beauty & the Beast

, but that's a tough judgment to make, because the entire cast – the entire *show*

– is, quite simply, fantastic.

Under the inspired, resplendent direction of Erin Lounsberry, the Music Guild closes its 2005 season in spectacular fashion with this staging of Disney's beloved 1991 film. Cindy Ramos-Parmley's costumes are gloriously witty creations, and the show is filled with visual treats; the functional fountain is a particularly nice addition to the properly elaborate set, but I also loved its more throwaway touches that almost come as in-jokes to fans of the film, such as the portrait of the Beast in his human, princely form, with claw marks scratched through his visage. Across the board, this show is *smart*, and it has been more than smartly cast.

In addition to the estimable Jenny Winn, *Beauty & the Beast's* ensemble is so wonderfully inspired that, if space permitted it, I would happily devote to them an entire paragraph each.

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Due to the nature of the Beast mask, the role doesn't allow the actor within much facial expression, but when that actor is as

physically

expressive as Nathan Bates is here, there's no cause for complaint. Bates also has beautiful focus and partners Winn admirably; their gradual union is performed with delicacy and style, and is often laugh-out-loud funny.

But this Disney opus is rare in that *every* character, given the right performer in the role, is allowed to be both touching and hilarious, and Music Guild's production has nothing

but

"right performers." I can't imagine the show being better cast. J. Adam Lounsberry's powerful baritone and natural imperiousness make him a joyously fatuous Gaston, and as his nebbishy ally, Lefou, Alex Ryser is an absolute hoot; letting loose a series of whines, grimaces, and dementedly gonzo readings, Ryser left me laughing with nearly every line. (He's like French Stewart off his meds.) Harold Truitt, as Lumiere, and Mike Millar, as Cogsworth, are a dream of a comic team, relaxed and authoritative and devastatingly funny. (Just so Truitt and Millar can do this Laurel-and-Hardy act again, Disney should consider a spin-off –

The Candlestick & the Clock

, maybe?)

I could go on and on about the cast

Okay. I will.

Julie Wold Peterson, playing Mrs. Potts, has a lilting, haunting soprano that washes over the audience like a wave – just try not to get misty-eyed at her rendition of the title number, which, as familiar with the song as we all are, is still enough to wring a tear or two. (Three, in my case.) Mark McGinn is charmingly eccentric as Belle's pop, and Kelsey Guard makes a stunningly assured Music Guild debut as the life-sized feather-duster, Babette – Guard is so blazingly alive on that stage that it's almost *distracting*.

Steve Quartell is an imposing, most handsome Monsier d'Arque; the character shows up late in the show and Quartell, conversing with the demons in his head, practically walks off with it. And how young Lauren VanSpeybroeck manages to be so endearing with only her *face* visible – she plays the teacup, Chip – I'll never know. But I'd be thrilled to sit through the show again to try to figure it out.

With the actors so good, the design so vivid, and production's score so marvelously well-played by Curtis Oelschlaeger's orchestra, Music Guild's *Beauty & the Beast* is not to be missed. The performance still lingers in my head a day after seeing it, and I'm not ready for it to be gone quite yet.