

Bloody Good: "Bat Boy the Musical," at the Timber Lake Playhouse through Sunday, July 8

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 03 July 2007 02:41

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The Timber Lake Playhouse's production of *Bat Boy the Musical* features a cast of 15 playing some two dozen characters, more than a fifth of whom will be dead by the curtain call. Necks are bitten, throats are slashed, overdoses are administered, and through it all,

Bat Boy

's performers look as though they couldn't possibly be having more fun.

En masse

, Timber Lake's ensemble just might compose the happiest musical cast I've seen all year, and considering the material they're working with, and the director they're working

for

, how could they be anything less?

Prior to *Bat Boy*, I'd seen six other Timber Lake productions directed by Brad Lyons, and I can't

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recall even one static or listless scene in any of them; even the measured, unhurried sequences in the recent *Dracula*, with its three-hour-plus running length, were hypnotic. His inventiveness in traditional book musicals (*The Full Monty*), farce (*Tom, Dick, & Harry*), and combinations of the two (*Urinetown*) is inspiring - Lyons elicits fiercely focused performances from his casts and always gives you something to look at - so it comes as little surprise that he has (again) topped himself with *Bat Boy*.

This hysterical, wildly clever, and oddly touching off-Broadway hit is a perfect fit for Lyons' gifts for over-the-top dementia and honest emotionalism; scenes that could come off as jokey or ridiculous are staged and performed with a fervor that transcends camp. (A tough act when a sizable portion of your cast, male and female alike, plays members of the opposite sex.) With frequent assistance by James Beaudry's sprightly choreography and the off-stage contributions of an excellent band, Lyons' *Bat Boy* scenes crackle with life and experimentation; his staging of the Act I closer, "Comfort & Joy," crescendos with *Les Miz*-like passion and is funny, to boot.

Clearly, Lyons' cast relishes the director's attention and creativity, as actor for actor, this is one of the most *fearless* assemblages of youthful talent I've ever seen. As Meredith, the well-meaning housewife who takes the feral, titular hybrid under her wing, Samantha Joy Dubina is a fantastically sharp comedienne; she throws herself into fits of daffy hysteria with the zeal of a young Carol Burnett. Yet with her imploring eyes and melancholy smile, Dubina also has a subtle, haunting quality - four weeks later, I can still hear her lightly comedic cadences as Doatsy Mae in Timber Lake's *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* - and brings true pathos to what, in lesser hands, could merely be a stylized June Cleaver parody.

Hillary Elk, meanwhile, is *thrillingly* stylized. Her dizzy, excitable Shelley - "stepsister" to Jay Reynolds Jr.'s *Bat Boy* - is like the peppiest cheerleader you've ever seen; her untamed feistiness brings to mind Reese Witherspoon in *Election*. When Elk and Dubina perform the show's funniest number, the frenzied escape song "Three Bedroom House," the joyous collision of the actresses' comic styles is a sight to see; I'd call it the production's show-stopper if so many other *Bat Boy* numbers, and cast members, couldn't lay claim to that title as well.

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Ben Mason has done spectacular work over his past two seasons at Timber Lake, but as the sociopathic Dr. Parker, the actor does something truly gutsy for a young actor: He flat-out refuses to be likable. His perfect deadpan offset by the malevolent gleam in his eyes, Mason's commitment to Parker's monstrosity reaps continual comedic rewards; preparing for an outing at which his monstrous "son" will meet his demise, Mason grins and tells the boy, "It'll be fun," setting off shivers - and nervous giggles - throughout the auditorium.

One after another, *Bat Boy's* ensemble finds ways to delight and surprise you. Zack Powell delivers startlingly forceful teenage bluster as Shelley's blowhard boyfriend, and the character's siblings are given dynamic life by Eli Pauley (an impassioned presence in every Timber Lake show this season) and Jacqui Pugh (whose effervescent naturalism allows her to steal scenes without seeming like she's *trying to*). Jeremy J. Day is hilariously dim as the town sheriff - he's a *sweet* sadistic bastard, like a slightly malevolent Gomer Pyle - and Jenny Guse and choreographer Beaudry, in unfussy drag as a town busybody, have only a handful of lines in which to nail their laughs and do so every time.

Tanner Bollinger provides first-rate vocals and easygoing appeal as the woodland deity Pan, while David Murray, who also dons a dress as a long-suffering, vengeance-minded mother, raises the roof as energetic preacher. And I mean that nearly *literally*: Murray sustains an exhilarating high note with such rafter-shaking abandon that Thursday night's audience applauded Murray's feat long before he finished.

And as he gets the production's final, ecstatic curtain call, allow me to give Reynolds the final bow here, too. It helps, of course, that he's in possession of such a tremendously entertaining role - a mewling, animalistic scavenger who morphs into an upstanding British preppy. But the triumph is all Reynolds'. Blessed with a beautiful tenor and wickedly sharp comic timing - and boasting wholly believable pointy ears and fangs - the actor gives a magical portrayal, yet you still may not be prepared for the *soul* Reynolds brings to the character; his deeply felt work gives welcome (and necessary) emotional context to the captivatingly silly proceedings. During *Bat Boy's* curtain call, Reynolds acknowledged the crowds' cheers by raising a jubilant fist in the air. I felt like doing the exact same thing.

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For tickets, call (815) 244-2035.