After an extended silent-movie montage – one featuring clips from F.W. Murnau's horror classic *Nosferatu* – and the appearance of the show's title, the Timber Lake Playhouse's *Sunset Boulevard* opens with screenwriter Joe Gillis (Brandon Ford) at the bottom of a swimming pool. Granted, the water, like that montage, is a multimedia projection, and Gillis is standing (and singing) rather than floating face-down. But the Act I prelude is still enough like the opening to Billy Wilder's beloved Hollywood *noir* that fans of the *Sunset Boulevard* movie will likely smile in recognition and appreciation, and we're returned to this scene of a future crime at the start of the musical's second act.

These are the two, and only, times that Timber Lake's production will find itself underwater.

It's been so long since I last visited Mt. Carroll's venue in the woods (an embarrassing 22 months) that I'll admit I anticipated enjoyment well before director/choreographer James Beaudry's presentation got underway. Hell, I was psyched well before the drive *there*. Yet beginning with those projections – which, throughout the show, are the strongest, most clever multimedia effects I've seen in an area-theatre production – *Sunset Boulevard* is a rather staggering achievement, so grandly designed and beautifully performed and thrillingly, deservedly *confident* that the bar for Timber Lake's season might already be set too high.

I'm betting it *isn't*; in past years, the summer-stock organization has routinely proven more than capable of topping itself. But with the almost criminally talented Beaudry at the helm, and a quartet of to-die-for principals leading a superb ensemble, composer Andrew Lloyd Webber's Wilder adaptation (with book and lyrics by Don Black and Christopher Hampton) is a glorious good time. Even the failings in the material – particularly Webber's too-frequent repetition of

musical themes and the songs' mostly underwhelming lyrics – are less pronounced given the fervor with which this *Sunset Boulevard* has been produced and acted. I caught the show on opening night, and the production was so polished that you would've thought it was *closing* night ... after a year-long run of performances.

This tragicomic tale of the faded, possibly crazy silent-film star Norma Desmond (portrayed here by Katherine L. Condit) and the young, definitely mercenary writer who becomes her script doctor and lover is set entirely in Hollywood, with locales including Desmond's sprawling gothic mansion, Paramount Studios, and the legendary Schwab's Pharmacy. I mention the locales specifically because they're among many elements in Timber Lake's production that might make your jaw drop. Employing two large-scale set pieces alongside a series of smaller ones that roll on and off the stage, scenic artist Amanda Sweger handily creates an entire, gorgeously designed universe – assisted, in no small part, by Michael Stanfill's atmospheric lighting and projections, and Tate Ellis' and Katy Freeman's consistently dazzling costumes.

And with the gift of a rotating set, Beaudry choreographs the movement between SoCal locations with supreme ease and fluidity, and *always,* it appears, in perfect time with the score, marvelously played by conductor Travis Horton's nine-person orchestra. The first transition into Desmond's manse – complete with majestic staircase and ceiling-high pipe organ – makes you want to applaud, and Gillis' early amble through Paramount's lot and offices is like the giddy stage equivalent of that opening, eight-minute tracking shot in Robert Altman's *The Player*. More and more, it seems, audiences want to *see* their money on the stage, and trust me, you'll see your money, and all of your fellow theatregoers' money, in every minute of *Sunset Boulevard*.

Not that the performances alone wouldn't make your ticket price a bargain. That topnotch singer Brandon Ford – so powerfully funny in Timber Lake's 2008 productions of *All Shook Up* and *The Producers* – proves he has dramatic chops to match his vocal and comedic ones, and proceeds to show us every conceivable side to Gillis; he's vain, charming, selfish, chivalrous, pathetic, and

ceaselessly dynamic. Colleen Johnson, despite having too little to do as fledgling writer and potential love interest Betty Schaefer, is effortlessly touching and truthful, and offers knockout vocals that bring to mind the performer's magical Maria in Timber Lake's 2008 *West Side Story* (also directed by Beaudry).

Cast in one of those expansive, signature roles for which broadness is almost mandatory, Condit does something very unusual, and very shrewd, with her Norma Desmond, toning down the histrionics and outsize theatricality so that this *grande dame* oftentimes seems more like a blushing ingénue. (The choice is a smart one because, as Desmond's plans for her return in a big-screen *Salome* suggest, she frequently *sees* herself as a 16-year-old.) Physically, Condit is a petite woman, and there are times here when the actress' slender figure and haunted, faraway quality are overwhelmed by the set and Beaudry's stage compositions – even in her show-stopper number "As If We Never Said Goodbye," which is the *last* number during which Desmond should vanish. Yet Condit's hesitant, beaten-up fragility in the role is wonderfully appealing, she's oftentimes terrifically funny (her dry admonishment of Gillis for his "filling-station shirt" is a particular howl), and when she's allowed to, the performer belts with a blazing voice that's as fabulously commanding as the character at her most demented.

Amidst the hard-working, personality-filled, and vocally phenomenal supporting ensemble – one whose individual names I'll no doubt be praising in future Timber Lake offerings – allow me to briefly recognize company member Dryden Meints, for his cheerfully harried Artie Green, and company guest Andrew Bro (the playhouse's first artistic director, back in 1961), for his moving cameo as Cecil B. DeMille. No amount of recognition, however, feels quite adequate for what actor John Chase gives us.

Portraying Desmond's vaguely menacing yet ever-solicitous manservant Max, Chase doesn't walk through rooms so much as gently *glide* between them; Max is the most physically present of the mansion's many ghosts. But for all of his engaging creepiness in the role, Chase also creates *Sunset Boulevard*'s most exquisitely heartbreaking figure, and the actor's subtle emotionalism – coupled with his angelic, feather-light tenor – hints at the real-life pain behind all the bleak black comedy. (Pay attention

to the actor, especially, during the scenes in which Max silently views Desmond's film footage or watches, helplessly, as the star verges on collapse. Nearly all of Chase's best moments land at times when you're not necessarily directed to notice them.) He's the absolute finest treat in a production that's teeming with them, and a production that couldn't serve as a more appropriate kickoff to Timber Lake's 50th season. This show is positively golden.

For tickets and information, call (815)244-2035 or visit TimberLakePlayhouse.org .