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Paramount's 'Little Mermaid' a grand surf-and-turf spectacle

By Hedy Weiss | Nov 28, 2016, 5:23pm CDT

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After seeing the Paramount Theatre production of “The Little Mermaid” — an altogether gorgeous surf-and-turf spectacle that puts most other versions of the Disney musical to shame — you might well be tempted to rename the show, “The Lion King (and Queen) of the Sea.”

'THE LITTLE MERMAID' Highly recommended When: Through Jan. 15, 2017 Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora Tickets: \$47 – \$59 Info: <http://www.ParamountAurora.com> Run time: 2 hours and 25 minutes, with one intermission

With its outstanding cast, its superb orchestra, its endlessly imaginative direction and choreography by Amber Mak, its wondrous flights and deep dives of fancy — including puppetry, aerial (and Ariel) ballets, eye-popping sets by the masterful Jeffrey D. Kmiec, seductive costumes by Theresa Ham, and a color palette that runs the gamut from deep sea to high sky hues — the show is just the latest evidence of why, in just over five years, Paramount’s Broadway Series has not only been able to transform Aurora into a city where the performing arts rule, but one in which a theater trumps a casino as a major economic engine. And that engine is only growing stronger.

But back to another sort of fairy tale — the story of young lovers who defy the destinies bequeathed to them by their fathers, who cross “species-related” borders to do so, and who encounter every sort of challenge (including a witchy octopus) along the way.



Kari Yancy (from left) plays Ariel, with Devin DeSantis as Prince Eric and Jonathan Butler-Duplessis as Sebastian the crab in Paramount Theatre’s production of “The Little Mermaid.” (Photo: Liz Lauren)

Based on the 1989 Disney film, the musical is rooted in the Hans Christian Andersen story about a mermaid who dreams of living in the world above the sea, and is willing to sacrifice her most prized possession — the beautiful singing voice she inherited from her late mother — in order to be with the sea-loving prince whose life she saves during a storm. And it features a fine book by Doug Wright (whose most recent show is “War Paint”), and a lovely, witty score (everything from reggae and calypso beats to pure Broadway) initially written for the film by Alan Menken (music) and Howard Ashman (lyrics, with additions by Glenn Slater).

The Paramount production, whose run was extended even before it opened, pulls out all the stops. But what is most impressive here is that the actors are so strong they are only enhanced — never overwhelmed — by the extraordinary special effects.

Kari Yancy uses her powerful, emotion-filled voice to fine effect as the restless mermaid, Ariel (with lovely renderings of “The World Above” and “Part of Your World”), but it is her breathtaking work on wires — as she “swims” from beneath the sea to its surface — that will remain etched in memory. (The effect is richly enhanced by Mike Tutaj’s projections and Jesse Klug’s painterly lighting.) And as Prince Eric, who has no desire to become king, and would far prefer to be a sailor, Devin DeSantis uses his superb voice, fervent acting, easy grace and good looks to conjure a prince of substance and charm.

But there also is not a single supporting character who does not leave a vivid impression. As Ariel’s father, King Triton, Evan Tyrone Martin expertly suggests the rage he feels towards humans who he believes responsible for his beloved wife’s death. As Sebastian, the beet red crab designated to be Ariel’s protector, the puppet-wielding Jonathan Butler-Duplessis generates major laughter. So does George Keating, who morphs from Prince Eric’s guardian to Chef Louis, a Frenchman with a taste for hacking and boiling “les poissons.” And for sheer, delicious evil, there is Christina Hall, as Ursula, that sea witch of an octopus who harbors a long resentment against her brother, Triton, for “stealing” the kingdom. She is served by the electric eel-like Flotsam (Adam Fane) and Jetsam (John Adam Keating).

Also deftly bonding with their puppets (the enchanting designs of Jesse Mooney Bullock) are Michael Ehlers as Scuttle, the fast-talking seagull, and little Flounder (the hugely engaging Ricky Falbo, who will alternate with Murphy Byrne). As for Ariel’s six jealous Mersisters (Ciera Dawn, Megan E. Farley, Allyson Graves, Mallory Maedke, Zoe Nadal and Haley Jane Schafer), they are power-voiced hoots who can belt and hoof with the best of them.

Mak’s grand-scale vision for the show, combined with her masterful control of storytelling, could not be more formidable as she sees to it that every special effect and essential human connection are at once magically electric and real. And the power of the show’s large orchestra, conducted by Tom Vendafreddo, generates its own stormy spells.

The audience at Sunday’s opening was filled with tiny mermaids (and a good number of mer-men, too), many of whom used the intermission to pose on the giant boulder installed in the lobby for photo ops. As a foundational “live theater experience,” it would be hard to top this “Little Mermaid.”

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George Keating plays Chef Louis in Paramount Theatre's production of Disney's "The Little Mermaid." (Photo: Liz Lauren)

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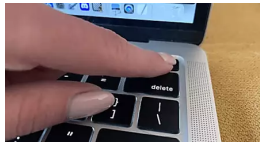
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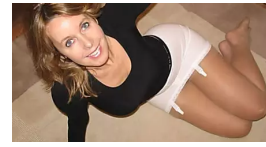
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