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Review: Sparkling 'Beauty and the Beast' shows how Paramount Theatre has helped transform Aurora

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Paul-Jordan Iansen as Beast in "Beauty and the Beast" at Paramount Theatre in Aurora (Liz Lauren Photo)

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Downtown Aurora in 2019 can be a beauty. The same few blocks in the 1990s always were a beast. And it is mostly the Paramount Theatre that has sparked the transformation.

The evidence was everywhere on Friday night as I walked from the train station. Holidays lights were being switched on. Dress rehearsals were taking place inside Amy Morton's swish new restaurant, [Stolp Island Social](#), attached to the theater. Families filled sidewalks that were empty for years. Cars honked and cops directed crowds. And girls in princess dresses were ubiquitous.



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You really have to see director Amber Mak's conventional but nonetheless spectacular new production of Disney's "Beauty and the Beast" in that context. The Paramount's homegrown series of musicals, which have been very successful, has as its calling card family-friendly entertainment. No theater has focused so rigorously on the desires of its audience. This means programming that might not make for the most exciting or revelatory evenings for critics like me (I've heard Belle say "Bonjour!" and seen that nasty hairy beastie change into a dazed-but-handsome dude enough times to make my head spin), but that overachieves when it comes to the big night out. The Paramount attracts folks who need the comfort of a familiar title because they just want the guarantee of spending some quality (and affordable) time with those they love. And if anyone tells you there is anything wrong with that, they don't understand how a lifelong love of the arts almost always begins that way.

Thus this review was, you might argue, somewhat compromised by the close proximity of some young theater-goers whose mouths fell open often at Jeffrey D. Kmiec's fairytale design. Kmiec's work here is really something; it's far enough away from the original concept to feel fresh but not so radical as to fight the structure of the show. It's more classy than cartoony. And, best of all, Kmiec layers his goodies. At one point

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couple have the big date that so entrains Chip (Aaliyah Montana, at opening), only for Mrs. Potts (Jennie Sophia) to stick him back in the cupboard.

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And Kmiec and the lighting designer, Jesse Klug, have baked scores of shimmering diodes into pretty much every wall and staircase, allowing his beastland to sparkle like Cinderella's castle. No need for all the hassle of Orlando. That, friends, is giving people what they came to see, and without busting their budgets for presents.

Paramount's "Beauty" is far and away the biggest local staging of this show and, to date, far and away the best, thanks to be some very experienced artists in its cast. It is beautifully sung, especially by Emmett O'Hanlon, who plays Gaston, and Paul-Jordan Jansen, who plays the prince; I was tickled how dazed and confused Jansen appeared after his infamous reinvention, avoiding the climactic preening of so many beasts of my prior acquaintance.

But what matters most is the heartfelt tone of the show, which some productions have gotten [spectacularly wrong](#). Not only is Beth Stafford Laird all-in, all night, but the scenes between her Belle and her pops (Ron Rains) are very touching, as is old Cogsworth (George Keating), realizing with his old pal Lumiere (Jackson Evans) that his worst fears have not come true. The princess-dress crowd probably won't get that, and let's

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Beth Stafford Laird and Paul-Jordan Jansen in "Beauty and the Beast" at Paramount Theatre in Aurora. (Liz Lauren photo)

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

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Review: "Beauty & The Beast" (3.5 stars)

When: Through Jan. 19

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd.

Running time: 2 hours, 40 minutes

Tickets: \$36-\$77 at 630-896-6666 or www.paramountaurora.com

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