



THEATER ENTERTAINMENT AND CULTURE STAGES

Paramount Theatre's 'Beauty and the Beast' oozes enchantment in dazzling production

The Paramount Theatre pulls out all the stops in a show filled with glorious vocals, razzle-dazzle dance numbers and plenty of Disney magic.

By Catey Sullivan - For the Sun-Times | Nov 25, 2019, 11:40am CDT

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The Paramount Theatre's production of "Beauty and the Beast" features Beth Stafford Laird as Belle and Paul-Jordan Jansen as the Beast." | Liz Lauren

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Sure it's a beloved fairy tale, but "Beauty and the Beast" is also basically a story about Stockholm Syndrome. Belle is held prisoner in the Beast's spooky enchanted mansion, kept from her beloved father and forced to spend her days doing — well, that isn't exactly clear.

As the days wear on, Belle learns to love her captor, especially after he rescues her from a pack of ravenous wolves. It's all very heroic, but he wouldn't have had to save her from wolves if she hadn't had to escape from his castle in the first place.

'Beauty and the Beast'



When: Through Jan. 19

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

Tickets: \$36 - \$74

Info: Paramountaurora.com

Run time: Two hours and 35 minutes, with one 20 minute intermission

And yet.

The visually dazzling and magnificently sung staging of “Beauty and the Beast” running through Jan. 19 at Aurora’s opulent Paramount Theatre is So. So. Good. I’m about as romantic as Tuesday morning at the DMV, yet I found myself getting a positively misty when Paul-Jordan Jansen’s charismatic Beast sent his good god y’all vocals soaring over the vast theater like a sunrise. “If I Can’t Love Her” is an opera distilled into a single love song, and it is extraordinary.

With Jansen at the center, director Amber Mak has crafted a “Beauty and the Beast” that minimizes the nonsense of Disney’s hyper-commodified princess culture. The production is enchanting.

The well-worn plot follows bookish Belle (Beth Stafford Laird) as she goes into the woods to find her missing father (Ron E. Rains). When she finds him in chains at chez Beast, Belle offers to take her father’s place. Father is freed. Belle is left to cope with a cavernous spooky lair under a curse that’s turned a prince into the Beast and his servants into household items including teapots, vanities, clocks, feather dusters and candelabras. There’s also an enchanted rose: When the last petal falls, the Beast’s staff will become forever inanimate and the Beast himself will pass the hirsute path of no return. The only thing that can break the spell is love. You can guess how things turn out.

Jackson Evans (left) as Lumiere, George Keating as Cogsworth, Jennie Sophia as Mrs. Potts and Izzie Rose as Chip in a scene from Paramount Theatre's new staging of Disney's "Beauty and the Beast." | Liz Lauren

What the music (score by Alan Menken, lyrics by Howard Ashman and Tim Rice) lack in complexity, they make up for hummability and humor. If there were a Hot Top 40 List of show tunes, the title song (warmly performed by Jennie Sophia's Mrs. Potts) would easily make the top five. As for sheer spectacle, "Be Our Guest" is more eye-popping than anything you'll find in that other France-set, odd-couple romantic spectacular, you know, the one with the crashing chandelier. "Be Our Guest" has a chandelier plus a kickline of gigantic, gleaming kitchen utensils, flaming candelabras and an area rug that can do one-armed round-offs. It ends with a kaboom of exploding tinsel that settles on the audience like so many Christmas trees. That sparkle-plenty aesthetic informs the whole show.

Jeffrey D. Kmiec's lavish set, Mike Tutaj's projections, Jesse Klug's lighting design and the aptly named Christopher Rose's magic design are cinematic. Theresa Ham's costumes are elaborate and clever. When the tightly wound Cogsworth (George Keating, who can say more with a deadpan face than many actors can say in an entire monologue) and the hotly handsome Lumiere (Jackson Evans, putting the "ooo" in "ooo la la") are joined by the feather-duster Babette (Katherine Lee Bourne, in full-on Folies Bergere mode) the look is fantastical.

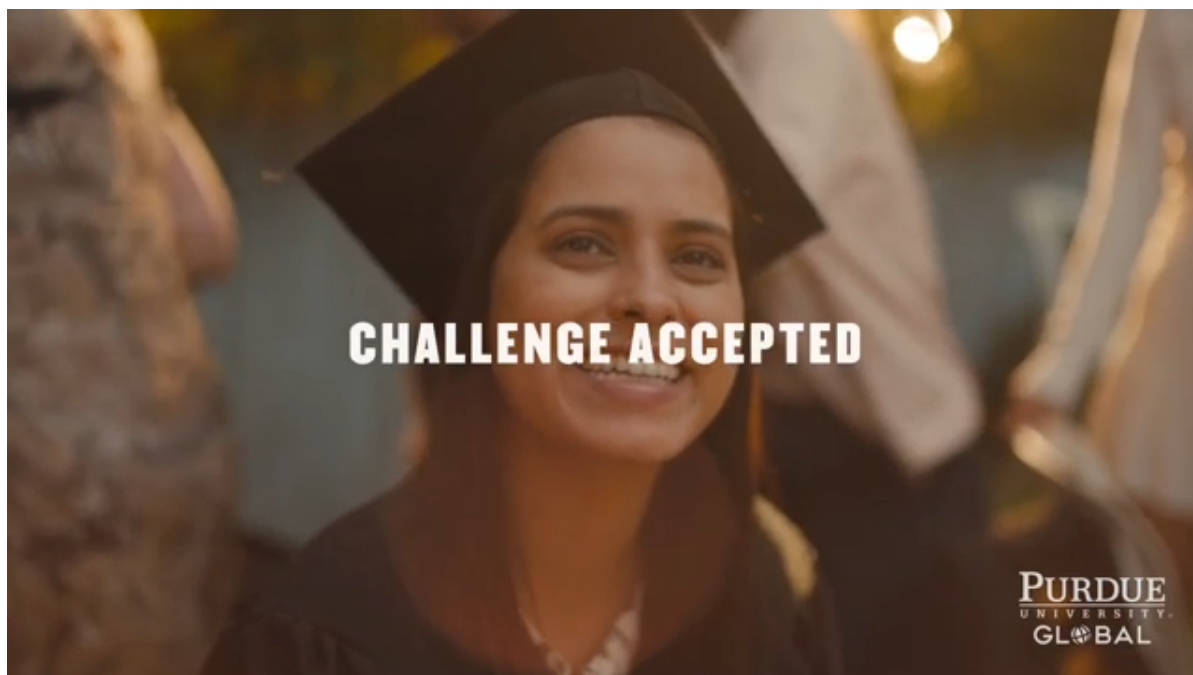
Which brings me to Gaston (Emmett O'Hanlon through Jan. 5; Trevor Vanderzee Jan. 8 – 19). O'Hanlon has the bowling-ball sized biceps required for a character who sings the praises of both thighs (“the perfect pair”) and his billowing body hair. As a barge-sized man whose brain size is in direct inverse proportion to the size of his ego, he’s hilarious.

Mak and co-choreographer Todd Rhoades outdo themselves throughout but “Gaston” — a drinking song wherein beer steins are used with the same intricate athleticism as arms and legs — will make you want to go find a bar frequented by CrossFit competitors.

As the one relatively normal (i.e., not cursed, not turning into a dresser and not a vainglorious sociopath) person on stage, Belle has to work to stand out and evoke sympathy, especially since the lyrics make her rather a snob. The opening number has Belle looking down upon lowly baguette sellers and milk maids who populate the small, “provincial” French village she despises. But Laird’s wholesome presence and capable soprano make her easy to like. When she glides through the shall-we-dance title song, it’s with the effortless warmth and grace of a true Disney princess.

And speaking of dancers: As the enchantress whosets the plot in motion, Darian Tene delivers a balletic solo of mesmerizing, ethereal beauty. It will make you wish for a spin-off musical: “The Enchantress and the Beast.” Clearly the casting wouldn’t be a problem. Somebody just needs to write it.

Catey Sullivan is a local freelance writer.



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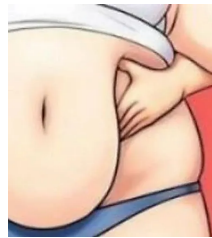


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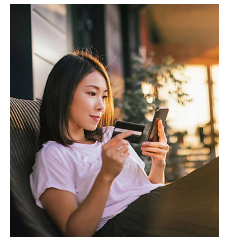
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Cubs catcher Willson Contreras has stayed on the field the last two games against the Reds, despite rolling his ankle in the 'Field of Dreams' game.

By Maddie Lee | Aug 13, 2022, 9:59pm CDT

CUBS

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The Cubs acquired the utility man from the Dodgers for veteran reliever Chris Martin.

By Maddie Lee | Aug 13, 2022, 9:03pm CDT

HALAS INTRIGUE

Halas Intrigue, Episode 228: Grading the Bears' preseason opener

One thing is sure, the Soldier Field turf needs work.

By Sun-Times staff | Aug 13, 2022, 7:53pm CDT

NEWS

2 women hospitalized in 'Playpen' boating incident

Emergency crews responded to a call of people in the water about 5 p.m. in the no-wake slip often referred to as "the Playpen," Chicago fire officials said.

By Sun-Times Wire | Aug 13, 2022, 6:29pm CDT

BEARS

Rookies Jaquan Brisker, Jack Sanborn are big H.I.T.S. in Bears' preseason opener

Brisker looked the part of expected Week 1 starter with impact plays. Sanborn, the Lake Zurich product, had a glorious Bears debut with two takeaways, a tackle for loss and two special-teams tackles.

By Mark Potash | Aug 13, 2022, 6:11pm CDT

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