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Published On: Thu, Sep 20th, 2018

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Amazing acting makes 'Hunchback of Notre Dame' a hit for Town and Country Players

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By John Dwyer

My hands were sore from clapping and my voice was raspy from cheering after seeing “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” at [Town and Country Players](#) in Buckingham.

I was bowled over by the performances, which I will go into further, and by director John Neuman’s utilization of the stage. Not only did he magically re-create Notre Dame and the streets of Paris in the limited space available to him, but he also moved a large cast through that space with a sure hand.

All the elements of this show came together so well that time whisked by during the two-and-a-half-hour performance. Of course, who would ever want to leave the streets of Paris and this group of charming performers, regardless of the tragedy that gets told?

The show has music by Alan Mencken (“Beauty and the Beast,” “Little Mermaid,” “Little Shop of Horrors” and “Sister Act”), and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz (“Godspell,” “Pippin” and “Wicked”). The show was commissioned by Walt Disney.



The focus of the story is much changed in the current musical adaptation. The original book had large portions describing the setting, i.e. the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Author Victor Hugo was writing this tale, in large part, to celebrate its Gothic architecture and to preserve the building intact in the face of those who wanted to “improve” it and make it more contemporary. He was appalled by the removal of stained glass windows so more light could come in through white glass.

His several story lines are reminiscent of “Les Miserables,” which was published 30 years after “Hunchback.” The tale has been altered to accommodate the musical but what is left is like “Les Mis” — the rigid, conflicted moralist (Archdeacon Frollo in “Hunchback” and Javert in “Les Mis”) against the struggling, downtrodden, but ultimately triumphant decent man (Quasimodo in “Hunchback” and Jean Valjean in “Les Mis”).

The story is about how Archbishop Claudio Frollo took in his brother Jehan’s infant, who was born with a hideous deformity, after his brother’s death. Frollo hid him away in the Cathedral of Notre Dame and he became the bell ringer. Frollo had given him the name “Quasimodo” which is Latin for “like a baby” but also, in the same context, means “almost human.” Due to how he would be treated by people for his appearance, Frollo kept him inside the cathedral. His only friends are the stone gargoyles and statues that he talks to and who, in his mind and along with the audience, talk back to him.

When given an opportunity to walk about Paris during the Feast of Fools, where the ugly and deformed are cruelly celebrated, Quasimodo goes out into the streets and gets crowned, due to his disfigurement, the “King of Fools.” During the celebration, he gets abused by the throng and is rescued by the beautiful gypsy Esmerelda. What ensues is a love quadrangle between Esmerelda, Quasimodo, Archdeacon Frollo (who is tormented by the lust he feels) and a guard sent to arrest her, Captain Phoebus de Martin. An ongoing theme in the play is how the gypsy immigrants are viewed as undesirables, which makes Frollo’s attraction to Esmerelda inexplicable and damnable according to his values.



Hunchback of Notre Dame

What could be more timely and more in need of heeding than this tale? Though this show was, no doubt, chosen for this time slot a year ago, there is a need to hear about kindness toward the other in a year where culture and politics, in some quarters, inhumanely demonize those who are different.

On their website, Town and Country Players describe themselves as “the home of many dedicated individuals whose goal is to bring the theatrical experience to local residents while personally enjoying the effort to the fullest.”

All of that is true, and this cast especially seems to be enjoying the effort to the fullest. But they are being modest. For the price of a \$20 ticket, “Hunchback” delivers a professional show whose lead actors are as good as any Equity actors.

Remember the name *Brady Love*. He plays Quasimodo. He is a young actor who seems born to play this role. His acting has nuance and his singing is thrilling. That he made my mind wander to the thought that Josh Groban started out in musical theater should say enough. His soulful solos in “Out There” and “Heaven’s Light” will send goosebumps up your arm. He holds a note so long in “Heaven’s Light” while running across stage that it seems impossible. I was breathless waiting for him to stop. He has abilities that can take him far.

His nemesis is his guardian, Archdeacon Frollo, played by Michael Schiumo. Besides the excellent singing voice that is needed to take on this role, what is more needed is an incredible actor who can make us identify with the moral ambiguity Frollo experiences. He definitely has a light and a dark side, and Schiumo is able to make this man a full-bodied individual. Torn between opposing thoughts of power and right, this is a character for the ages. There are many men and women in today’s world who are like him, and Shiumo’s s multilevel playing of this man creates a recognizable and believable character.

Jenny McNiven as Esmerelda and Lee Damon as Captain Phoebus de Martin have gorgeous voices and their duet of “Someday” is a highlight of the show. Melissa Mongi provides a needed humorous touch as Clopin, the gypsy leader and leads the gypsies in rousing song in “Topsy Turvy” and “Court of Miracles.”

A shout out also to Adam Zucal, who had multiple roles and was chameleon-like with them, but was especially effective as Frollo’s brother Jehan.

This is not an easy show for a production team. Kudos to Barb Ench (scenic designer), Mindy Rubinlicht (musical director), David Sharper (set designer), Matthew Schultheis (stage manager), Ann Cole (costume designer), Dustin Karrat (fight director), Dana Joy Carducci (choreographer) and Scott Monsees (lighting/sound designer/technical director/special effects).

After seeing this show, I called friends despite the late hour because I was so excited for them to see this show. They tried to purchase tickets online, and were unable to reserve the times they wanted — the show is selling out. But do try to grab a ticket– it is so well worth it.

“Hunchback” continues only though Saturday at Town and Country Players, 4158 Old York Road, in Buckingham. Tickets can be [purchased online](#), or call (800) 838-3006.

About the Author



Charlie Sahner - “Once you can accept the universe as matter expanding into nothing that is something, wearing stripes with plaid comes easy.” - Einstein

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