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This 'Jekyll' really has two faces

By Marcus Crowder - Bee Theater Critic

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Good or evil? The complex duality of human nature has long been a fascination of storytellers.

Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" in particular has dramatically captured the essence of this fascination through the original and its numerous adaptations. While telling the tale of the virtuous Dr. Henry Jekyll and his more antisocial alter ego, Edward Hyde, the story has transferred from page to stage to film.

Director Marcia Milgrom Dodge's visually stunning new Music Circus production "Jekyll & Hyde: The Musical" brings to the stage an often-revised musical version of the popular story. Dodge's virtuoso orchestration of the Music Circus' revolving stages, and Michael Schweikardt's brilliantly suggestive stage designs give the production a profound visual impact and visceral appeal going well beyond the limited influence of the often dull music.

Beginning with a 1990 concept album, before a production had been staged, composer Frank Wildhorn and veteran lyricist Leslie Bricusse created their first take of the musical. An early version of the staged show came to Sacramento as part of the Broadway Series (now Broadway Sacramento) in August 1995. After two years of touring, an altered version with some different songs opened on Broadway in 1997 and ran for more than four years.

The new Music Circus production is based on the 2001 Fullerton Civic Light Opera script, which has been endorsed by Wildhorn and Bricusse, and just as importantly Music Theatre International, the script's musical theater licensing house.

Ironically, as much as the show has been revisited and revised, the actual songs are the production's weakest elements. With Wildhorn's music running the gamut from overblown power ballad ("I Need To Know") to bland power ballad ("Sympathy, Tenderness") and Bricusse's mostly banal lyrics ("This Is the Moment") broadly sketching the most obvious of emotions, this is a musical in which the songs feel like filler in between the dramatic sections.

Yet, the uninspired songs are often given commanding performances and appealing characterizations from the cast led by Mike McGowan as the tormented Jekyll-Hyde. The electric McGowan uses his robust voice and confident presence in defining the tragic descent of Jekyll's virtuous ambition into the violent retribution of Hyde.

In this version of the story, Jekyll is a promising doctor and researcher inspired to experiment on himself in an effort to find a cure for his mentally ill father. His experiments transform him into the vicious, lusty Hyde who takes murderous revenge on those who wouldn't support Jekyll's research.

While there is a leaden symbolic duality in Jekyll-Hyde's romantic interests -- "working girl" Lucy and good girl Emma -- actresses Maria Eberline and Liz Pearce, respectively, add needed definition to the slight characters. Peter Reardon has palpable menace as the spurned Simon Stride, while James Judy and Joseph Kolinski are excellent supportive voices.

Director Dodge, who has become a Music Circus regular, stages this production with a giddy panache and confidence. The second act's opening sequence of "Murder, Murder" set in the streets of London and on a cleverly realized train platform is a tour de force of coordinated movement, music and stagecraft. Without doubt, the scene of the summer.

Designer Schweikardt's rendering of Jekyll's laboratory and Kyle Lemoi's inventive lighting add to this

production's creative allure. If only the music was equally remarkable -- but then that's the duality of theater.

JEKYLL & HYDE: THE MUSICAL

3 1/2 stars

WHAT: Music Circus production

WHEN: Continues at 2 and 8 p.m. today, 8 p.m. Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, and 7:30 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Wells Fargo Pavilion, 1419 H St.

TIME: 2 hours and 25 minutes, including one intermission

TICKETS: \$39 to \$51

INFORMATION: (916) 557-1999, www.californiamusicaltheatre.com

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