



Through a glass darkly, 'Jekyll & Hyde' shines at Music Circus

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Frank Wildhorn musicals: Love them or loathe them, from the outright dud "Dracula" and the silly "Scarlet Pimpernel" to the Tony-nominated oratorio "The Civil War" and, perhaps his best-known work, "Jekyll & Hyde." The latter, based on Robert Louis Stevenson's well-known novel "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," has set up shop - uh, make that drug laboratory - at Music Circus in Sacramento, where it makes its premiere in the round. Directed by the savvy Marcia Milgrom Dodge, who assembled a balanced, talented group of singers and actors for her sometimes surprisingly rewarding staging, it continues to Sunday at the 15th and H streets venue.

I saw the 1995 national touring production in Sacramento and left the Community Center Theater with mixed feelings. They included distaste for the music's periodic bombast, its gloomy story and over-the-top singing by male lead Robert Cuccioli; but they also included raves for soprano and female lead Linda Eder (Wildhorn's wife, by the way), who played the prostitute Lucy. At the time, I recall the musical would have been a wash-out without Eder, whose shimmering vocals, top to bottom, have been compared to Barbra Streisand's.

While Eder's glorious gifts overwhelmed everyone else 12 years ago, nearly every major character in this new performance boasts an effective voice, credible acting know-how and, apparently, a collaboratively supportive spirit. I walked out of the theater, thinking that fans of this show, called "Jekkies," are justified in their enthusiasm. The reality is, of course, a new cast and director make all the difference, but polar-opposite reactions to Wildhorn's most marketable piece are bound to continue.

Over the years, the musical has incurred several versions, the script and song order tweaked by Wildhorn and various collaborators, something the Jekkies keep track of, like Giants baseball fans noting every Barry Bonds at-bat. California Musical Theatre president Richard Lewis used the 2001 Fullerton Civic Light Opera script in this case, a wise choice.

Dodge, scene designer Michael Schweikardt and lighting maven Kyle Lemoi must have closely studied Stevenson's 1886 story about a romance and an epic struggle between good and evil embodied in one man, Henry Jekyll, whose drug experiments pit himself against his sinister, vengeful and murderous alter ego, Edward Hyde. Together they find engaging portents of meaning in racks of glass beakers, dark lampposts with flickering lights, a sparse brothel called The Red Rat and enough stage smoke to make a theatergoer believe that they have, indeed, created a series of cool, foggy London nights. And no less a helpful hand in this 2 1/2-hour span of theater magic are Ann Curtis' sharply tailored original costumes that lend a glossy atmosphere to all the Victorian-era histrionics.

But, more than anything else, the cast's vocal agility makes this staging, with book and lyrics by Leslie Bricusse, memorable.

Tenor Mike McGowan - whose athletic build, matinee-idol good looks and shock of black hair combine for a manly profile - portrays Jekyll/Hyde. He takes charge right away with "Lost in the Darkness," a tune descriptive of the stage atmospherics.

And, from the outset, Wildhorn's music strikes familiar, traditional chords. True to the musical design of his other pieces, it ranges from standard melodic ballads, like "Take Me As I Am," "Someone Like You" and "Transformation," to dissonant, percussive tunes, such as the burlesque "Bring on the Men" and "This Is The Moment," which serves as a vehicle to prove that McGowan can long sustain a sweet note. (It should be noted that this song was recorded for the 1990 concept album that became the basis for launching the musical and gained some currency later when figure skating medalist Paul Wylie used it during his Olympic performances.)

Playing Lucy, the saucy prostitute and the object of Hyde's malevolent affections, soprano Maria Eberline, a short, spunky actress, mesmerizes listeners with "No One Knows Who I Am" and "Bring on the Men," a tour de force for her and she graphically details her sexual exploits, skills and needs. But she was especially on the mark during the operatic quartet "His Work and Nothing More." In the duet "In His Eyes," teaming with Liz Pearce, cast of Emma, Jekyll's upper-class fiancée, her smooth transitions from note to note proved fetching. Their seamless voices and flawless delivery of this tune prompted the loudest audience applause of the night.

Bricusse took some liberties with Stevenson's story, especially the all-important final scene. Suffice it to say, Jekyll,

in the end, gets a bloody taste of the justice he meted out to those St. Jude's Hospital governors who spurned his drug experiments.

"Jekyll & Hyde" continues to Sunday at Music Circus, 15th and H streets, Sacramento. For performance times and tickets, \$39 to \$51, call (916) 557-1999 or visit www.tickets.com.

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