

# 'Beauty and the Beast' at the Oriental: Belle and Mr. Beast save an otherwise hairy production

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I'm not the most enthusiastic welcoming committee when non-Equity tours of Broadway musicals such as "Beauty and the Beast" land in one of the major Loop houses like the Oriental Theatre, especially for a six-week run.

While these low-cost productions have a role in bringing tours to smaller cities, New York would erupt with howls of protest if such a production landed on Broadway. I fail to see why downtown Chicago should be any different. Especially when there is little or no disclosure of the distinction in promotion materials and no meaningful reduction in ticket prices. "Beauty and the Beast" will cost you up to \$85 for the best seats, though discounts are out there.

What "non-Equity" (or non-union) means is that you're seeing actors who have never done a Broadway show (this at Broadway in Chicago) and are, most likely, just a year or two out of training and on their first tour (older actors tend to come from the light-opera world or a variety of international or nonprofessional backgrounds). These shows are massive profit centers when they sell well, because their costs are but a fraction of, say, "Billy Elliot" or "Wicked" — to name two top-tier shows that once filled this most fabulous of Chicago venues. Much of the orchestra you hear striking up most of Alan Menken's wonderful score is housed inside a computer. It ain't so much a matter of raising a baton as hitting "play."

I wandered over to the pit Thursday night and counted the musicians. There are several more players here than reported in other cities; I suspect the Chicago Federation of Musicians reminded the producers and presenters that Chicago audiences have the reasonable expectation of actual live music when they come downtown to a big show. We owe them our thanks.

This is the second non-union tour to land here in a matter of weeks, on the heels of "Spring Awakening" in May. "Beauty and the Beast," which opened its second visit Thursday night, is a little different, in that at least it does not pretend to be a re-creation of the first Broadway production (Disney's "Beast" had a long and spectacular run in the late '90s at the Chicago Theatre). It was reconceived for this tour, mostly by the original creative artists working for NETWORKS Presentations. The design is entirely different.

It's not much good. The storybook treatment of the little French hamlet that houses Belle, Gaston and the rest of the mostly unpleasant villagers generally suffices. But the designer, Stanley A. Meyer, failed to solve the little matter of the Beast's castle, which is supposed to be a historic locale of such enchantment that it captivates the bookish Belle, her rude and hairy host notwithstanding. In this production, it feels as if Lumiere (whose attached candles have all the spark of a soggy firework), Cogsworth, Mrs. Potts, et al., have landed in the middle of nowhere. The library has a few cartoony books, at which Belle, if there were any logic in play, would turn up her nose. The crummy platforms and bits of stairs didn't do it for me when I first saw this production in 2010, and they don't do it for me now. "Be Our Guest" is a pale imitation of the original.

But, the cast is much better this time than was the case when this tour was here in 2010. Night and day, actually. The star rating above is for them.

Emily Behny, the very pretty youngster who plays Belle, has quite a lot going on. She can't deviate too far, of course, from the look and style of the Disney model, but I was struck by her acting. Many Belles wander smiling through the proceedings. With Behny, you felt something was at stake. She doesn't have a huge voice, but her work is pleasingly honest and detailed and she's most empathetic. So is Mr. Beast, who was a nightmare last time. But I liked Dane Agostinis' performance very much. He deviates from the handsome-leading-male routine, offering a funnier and sweeter interpretation that made the character less one-dimensionally angry, much warmer and generally more complex: I've never seen another Beast get applause after saying to Belle, "Why are you being so difficult?" But this guy did. Good for him. He deserves more than they are paying him.

After the transformation (also better than 2010, in part because the long blackout in the middle is gone), Agostinis looks as if he has been on quite the emotional journey. All in all, you buy this couple, and they're reasonably well supported by Logan Denninghoff's Gaston, Benjamin Lovell's authentic Brit of a Cogsworth, Andrew Kruep's wry Lefou and, especially, Jen Bechter's Madame de la Grande Bouche. After that, things thin out fast, but you and your kids will at least be seeing some worthy leading performances this time around.

I would say most folks, especially those with kids, left quite satisfied. This "Beauty" is more of an overt kids show than before, and kids will enjoy it.

Oh, and when you're at the box office, tell 'em you want the non-Equity discount. Good luck with that.

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