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THEATER



AMANDA AND AUSTIN
LAWRENCE IN RED CANE'S
LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS

PLANT FOOD

The Phoinix Players' last production at The Red Cane Theater

With 20 songs and the precedent of a 1983 film starring Steve Martin and Bill Murray, *Little Shop of Horrors* isn't the easiest musical to pull off. But Red Cane Theater, home of the Phoinix Players, succeeds in telling the story of the Venus flytrap from Hell on Skid Row.

Little Shop of Horrors premiered on Broadway in 1982 and is based on the 1960 cult film of the same name. This dark surrealist comedy tells the story of Seymour, an orphan working at Mushnik's Skid Row Florists who develops a new plant, called Audrey II. The plant brings in business, but only grows when it's fed blood.

Fueled with newfound success and his love for the human Audrey, who also works at the flower shop, Seymour starts offering people to the plant.

Blending stacks of harmonies with tightly choreographed numbers (including a tap dance!), the cast revs up the energy and keeps it there for two hours, even after serving audience members drinks and snacks before the show. Despite the cartoony acting

style often demanded by musical comedies, the cast somehow finds a balance between sincerity and caricature, making the characters likeable and more rounded than most in the genre.

Austin and Amanda Lawrence, who play Seymour and Audrey, have a charming chemistry — which may be part good acting and part the fact that they're also married. Other standout performances come from the three women playing the siren trio who perform some of the show's best vocal work, like the 30-second solo at the start of "Skid Row." The plant is controlled by skillful puppeteers, who manage to bring one of the sauciest characters — with a great Motown voice by Daniel Halstead — out of an otherwise inanimate object.

Little Shop of Horrors is your last chance to see the Phoinix Players at the Red Cane Theater, the venue they have called home since 2012. After this weekend's shows, the troupe will be hitting the road for the rest of the summer, performing both nationally and internationally. — *Sophia June*

Little Shop of Horrors runs 7 pm Friday and Saturday, July 17-18, at The Red Cane Theatre, 1077 Chambers St.; \$17-\$20 (dinner and dessert tickets are extra), 556-4524.

REEL LIFE FANTASY

Actors Cabaret spins a fantastical yarn with Big Fish

You think your dad has outrageous stories?

According to Edward Bloom, the years before he became a salesman were filled with heroism, giants, witches, mermaids and indentured servitude in the name of love.

In *Big Fish*, now playing at Actors Cabaret of Eugene, Edward's son Will listens to his father's stories with a critical ear. He tries to believe, but it is the whopper about how Dad saved a U.S. Army general from a blow dart in the middle of a USO musical review — thus turning the tide of the war — that sends Will over the edge. When he can no longer believe his father, he is ultimately unable to respect him.

Will, a reporter, spends his days searching for the truth. In the last months of his father's life, Will turns his investigative skills on his family, convinced he will never know dad until he finds out exactly which stories are true and which are bunk.

Based on the 2003 Tim Burton film, which was based on the 1998 novel by Daniel Wallace, *Big Fish* loses something in the process of so many translations. The first act of this stage version

is tough, with too much focus on extravagant song-and-dance numbers and not enough attention to plot.

It is only in the second act, when a satisfying conflict is introduced, that the complexities of the situation come into focus. Like a song shifting into the correct key, ACE's production suddenly finds some harmony.

There is a lot to like in watching these wild stories come to life in director Joe Zingo's hands. ACE goes all-out in casting and costuming. Michael Watkins gives a moving performance as Edward, and Anthony Krall ably plays Will. Cody Mendonca enacts Edward's memories of his youth with comic book heroism. Alexis Myles, Johnathan Strand and Larry Brown elevate minor parts with clever characterization. Kim Fairbairn is lovely as Sandra.

Big Fish requires of its audience an extreme suspension of disbelief. Like an expert fisherman, keep your patience through the first act and watch as ACE wades deep into this father-son story, eventually hooking something worth bragging about. — *Anna Grace*

Big Fish runs through Aug. 8 Actors Cabaret of Eugene; \$16-\$27, tickets at actorscabaret.org.