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THEATER BY RICK LEVIN



JENNY PARKS AND ANTHONY KRALL
IN ACE'S *THE LITTLE MERMAID*

HEED THE SIREN'S CALL

*In which a grumpy reviewer falls in love with
The Little Mermaid at Actors Cabaret of Eugene*

I have two sisters, much younger than me, the offspring of my father's second marriage. I love them both dearly, but when they were little girls and I was in my 20s, they drove me batshit crazy — especially with their fanatical devotion to all things Disney. Both of them possess gorgeous singing voices, always have, and traipsing around the house they would suddenly stop, raise their arms with operatic urgency and begin belting out some saccharine ballad from *The Lion King* or *The Little Mermaid*.

If I hear about Ariel one more time, so help me ...

Needless to say, I've never subjected myself to actually sitting through a viewing of *The Little Mermaid*, which I perceived as some sort of inverted Cinderella take on the Hans Christian Andersen tale: Sailor-prince falls in love with bumptious mermaid, who makes a Faustian bargain to trade her tail for legs and chase down the landed gentry, blah, blah, etc.

So it was with this patronizing, intolerant attitude that I attended opening night of Actors Cabaret of Eugene's staging of the Disney classic. And it didn't take long for the scales to fall from my eyes: Thanks to the graceful direction of Joe Zingo — coupled with a really strong cast, fantastic costumes and a tidal atmosphere of buoyant nostalgia that seemed to infect the entire audience — ACE's production of *The Little Mermaid* is stylish, engaging and just plain fun.

Impressively, Zingo and company clear the stage almost entirely of props, creating an open space (and ocean) for the full frolic of splendidly adorned characters. The costuming, also designed by Zingo, is truly glorious, but all the stuffed tentacles and gleaming glowfish in the world would mean nothing if the folks inhabiting the outfits weren't equally mesmerizing. It's here, in its performative aspect, that *The Little Mermaid* really hits it big.

As Ariel, Jenny Parks is captivating in the title role: rambunctious, romantic and wonderstruck, and with a nimble voice well suited to those classics like "The World Above" and "Part of Your World." Parks finds her match in Joel Ibanez, who plays a charming Prince Eric. Emily Westlund reveals her comic chops as the malapropist seagull Scuttle, Anthony Krall is hilariously frantic at the patrician crustacean Sebastian and Erica Jean, in her eye-popping octopus outfit, steals every scene she's in as the scheming sea witch Ursula.

This is to mention just a few of the more muscular roles, though there really isn't a weak link to be found. The large cast blends and balances nicely, especially on the musical numbers, which are vocally strong and choreographed with elegance. Even for a disbeliever like me, unfamiliar with the animated film, it's hard not to get swept up into the collective glee of such a bubbly, well-executed show.

The Little Mermaid is the best thing ACE has done in a while — a colorful, enticing production that is more than good enough to melt the resistance of the grumpiest anti-Disney curmudgeon in any family.

I think I owe my sisters a phone call.

The Little Mermaid runs through July 23 at Actors Cabaret of Eugene; \$16-\$34.95 (with dinner option). For tickets and info, call 541-683-4368.

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