



Little Shop of Horrors at Palace Theatre
Reviewed by Matthew Dougall October 2016

Little Shop Of Horrors is something of a cult Musical, and a complete and shameless Mickey-take of the trend in the late 1950s for Hollywood to produce low budget horror films, affectionately categorised as B-Movies [so named because they were the first film in a Double Feature, and not the main attraction]. In the case of this particular story, we see Mushnik, owner of a flower shop in a run-down, poor and forgotten NY neighbourhood, and his two hapless employees - the rather ditzy tart-with-a-heart, Audrey, and the clumsy and downtrodden Seymour. Their fortunes are certain, they are going nowhere and the shop is closing up for good - that is until Seymour shows his employer a 'strange and unusual' plant that he has been cultivating.

This plant, now nicknamed Audrey II, is the shop's and Seymour's saviour. It brings them fame and fortune in untold measure. But all this comes at a price, a very heavy price indeed. The

plant thrives off fresh human blood. At first this doesn't cause any concern as Seymour quite happily adds anaemic to his list of complaints, but then, the fates turn against them and he finds himself feeding the plant with Audrey's dead dentist boyfriend, and then with Mushnik, and before long even Audrey falls foul of the plant's blood lust. If all of this sounds a little dark and macabre, don't panic, it's all very tongue-in-cheek and sent up in the best possible taste! And with some fantastic Musical numbers, it can't fail to be a hit!

In this all new production from ***Sell A Door Theatre Company***, we see a lovely run-down Mock Gothic neighbourhood, with a really nice idea of radio announcements pre-show, and I loved the newspaper board on SL constantly changing the headlines. What didn't work so well however was that majority of the Musical is set inside the Florist Shop and yet, these scenes were played towards the back of the stage on a small platform quite a way from the audience. Not only this but the shop front was flat which was flown in and out countless times, most of these unnecessarily and it was very distracting. I would have liked the shop interior to have taken more precedence and in all honesty, we didn't even ever need to see the shop front.

Seymour, played by **Sam Lupton**, had a lot more about him than I have ever seen before. He wasn't the hapless klutz at all, and in fact, so 'normal' was he that one wondered why on Earth he was even stuck working in Skid Row in the first place. The character calls for the stereotypical cardboard cut-out 'unsuspecting jerk' who is a total no-hoper, and yes, Seymour certainly does need to be able to have the power of self-realisation and understand the consequences of his actions, but I did feel that Lupton had created too round a character right from the start. Too healthy (he kept springing and jumping around the stage with the grace of a gazelle) and too smart (both mentally and actually). The glasses were missing, as was his baseball cap - two 'trademark' items worn by Seymour. I warmed to Lupton as an actor very much, and as this was the first time I have seen him on stage, enjoying his stage presence and singing and dancing abilities greatly. I just felt that unfortunately he really hadn't quite understood what was required for this particular role.

Playing opposite him was **Stephanie Clift** as Audrey. I enjoyed her interpretation of the role; the classic dumb-blonde with a high-pitched ditsy voice were both there in abundance, but there was also something else... a hint every now and again of a gutsy, carnally knowledgeable Audrey which came as both a surprise and pleasure each time it came out. I really didn't like the *Somewhere That's Green* song though. This was spoilt by both Audrey's interpretation of it, and the strange, not-quite-in-focus projections going on behind her. These were I assume to help our understanding of the items she was singing about, but mostly it was clouds and green fields, and was very distracting.

Rhydian was Orin, the masochistic dentist. We neither heard nor saw his motorbike which was a pity, but as far as characterisations are concerned, Rhydian hit the nail absolutely firmly and squarely on the head. If Steve Martin's film role was the definitive performance, then Rhydian has just redefined it! A strong character actor with a deep, sonorous and strong voice to match. I enjoyed his tiny little cameos at the end too!

Paul Kissaun was Mushnik, the elderly NY Jewish flower shop owner. It is a great role for any actor to play, and Kissaun made a very good job of it. I would have liked him to have spoken in a more authentic NY Jewish accent though; just simply saying the Yiddish words and doing a pseudo-Jewish dance in 'Mushnik And Son' wasn't quite enough for me. But maybe that's just me!

Again, where this production fell a little flat for me, was with The Ronettes. These are three black girls who, throughout the show, comment narrator-like on the story, and both interact with the rest of the cast during the dialogue scenes, but continue the narrative to the audience in the form of song. They are the all-seeing, all-knowing 'Greek chorus' who already know the outcome before the show even starts. They are written as a pop trio, the likes of which were very popular under labels such as Motown etc, such as The Shirelles, The Chiffons and The Crystals. The only concession to this in this evening's Musical was their final number which,

considering how they were dressed, acted and behaved throughout the rest of the Musical was very much out of place and was not understood.

The directing (**Tara Louis Wilkinson**) therefore gave out some very mixed messages. On the one hand it was well observed and had some lovely original and creative ideas which kept the production fresh and alive; and yet, on the other hand, some of those ideas seemed to go against and detract rather than enhance. I enjoyed the choreography (

Matthew Cole

) greatly except the Da-Doo sequence, and loved the idea of using the film's closing title music to bow to; but perhaps maybe more choreography could have been done for this too, it was just a little weak and tame for the cast's final bow.

The star of this and indeed any Little Shop show though has to be the plant itself, Audrey II. And with this, I am extremely happy to report, Wilkinson did not tamper, and it worked wonderfully. Going from a small hand held venus fly-trap style plant, into the huge man-eating alien life form, thanks to two men who between them moved the plant around and provided its iconic voice, **Nei**

I Nichols

and

Josh Wilmott

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If you have never seen this Musical before then you are in for the treat of your lives; if you have then it is still a hugely enjoyable and fast-paced entertaining show, just not maybe exactly what you were expecting. But hey; that's live theatre for you! And remember, whatever you do, don't feed the plant!