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One Ounce Opera's *There's Beauty in the Beast*

The new operetta by Esther's Follies veterans Michael Nesline and Steve Saugey played *Frankenstein* for laughs but also found its heart

REVIEWED BY ROBERT FAIRES, NOVEMBER 6, 2015, ARTS

"Attend the tale of Frankenstein"

Even if you didn't know the opening chorus to *Sweeney Todd*, had never heard Sondheim's somber ballad about "the demon barber of Fleet ... Street," you could see where *There's Beauty in the Beast* was headed from that initial line. Just the sight of the show's five singers, flashlights held under their chins to create that deliberately cheesy, low-rent lighting effect for something *spoo-ooky*, made clear the chamber operetta would be goofing on Mary Shelley's *Modern Prometheus*, serving up a bargain-basement burlesque of Victor F's obsessive quest to reanimate dead tissue. And as it introduced us to a character named Lazee Suzanne, songs like "Cash for Kidneys," and a Frankensteinian brain-wave device consisting of a couple of colanders wired to a toaster, the show followed through on that promise in spades.

Creators Michael Nesline and Steve Saugey, whose comedy careers go back to the early years of Esther's Follies, scarcely let a minute go by without tossing in a gag of some kind, and they were as likely to draw from Broadway and TV as the novel or any of its legion of celluloid adaptations: A padre arrived with news of a mob of torch-bearing villagers by singing "City on fi-re!" (another *Sweeney* reference); Victor ended conversations with a snatch of Carol Burnett's signature sign-off, "I'm so glad we had this time together ..." The savvy irreverence, vaudevillian pacing, and brevity of it all – even with a pair of intermissions, the operetta's three acts were covered in 45 minutes – called to mind old Warner Bros. cartoons, and one in particular: the Bugs-and-Elmer Wagnerian spoof, "What's Opera, Doc?"

That said, *There's Beauty in the Beast* wasn't just about laughs, and therein lay its surprises. Rather than mine the Frankenstein tale's traditional themes of playing God and resurrecting the dead, Nesline dug into the notion of bodies and what inhabits them. Here, Igor and the servant Lazee Suzanne were individuals trapped by their physical shells, forced to live as genders that didn't match what they knew themselves to be in their souls. He identified as a she and she as a he, so the doctor's device allowed them to switch bodies and free themselves – in essence, creating new life. Dr. Frankenstein's wife, upset over the loss of her husband's love, sought to reclaim it by transferring her mind into the body of the thing he loved more, his Creature. Even though these ideas of identity and remaking oneself for love were not explored in depth, the way they were put forth in song – in the quality of the music and the delivery by the singers in One Ounce Opera's production – brought forth an unexpected tenderness

in the midst of all the comedy. The creators could have kept their show aimed at the funny bone, and its audience would have walked away happy, but they took the risk of playing to the heart, and it gave those who saw it something to feel as well. Likewise, One Ounce could have continued to work with the proven repertoire, but it took a chance on something new, which is rarely easy, and that paid off for the company, too. This production showed there's beauty in the risk as well as the beast.

There's Beauty in the Beast

A private residence

Oct. 30

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