

Everything's better, even seems wetter, in 'The Little Mermaid' at the Paramount in Aurora



By **Chris Jones**
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If you'd told me that Disney's "The Little Mermaid" would form the basis for one of the most innovative musical productions of the season, and that the dude playing Sebastian, the anthropomorphic crab, would compete as one of the finest Chicago-area performances of the year, I would have said that was about as likely as Donald J. Trump hiring Ursula the Sea Witch as secretary of the Navy.

But ...

Thanks to a truly breathtaking and counterintuitively designed set from Jeffrey D. Kmiec and a really, really good idea from director Amber Mak, that is exactly the situation this holiday season at the historic, gussied-up-for-holidays Paramount Theatre in Aurora, where Disney's most problematic Broadway musical has been transformed into a spectacle not unlike sticking your head into an aquarium and spending a couple of hours happily blowing bubbles with your delighted kids.

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What's the really, really good idea, you ask, before you commit to a familial holiday excursion to the far western suburbs?

Coming up. But first, some history. "The Little Mermaid" ("Part of Your World," "Kiss the Girl," legless Disney princess, blah, blah, blah) was, in 2007, turned into a Broadway musical under the direction of Francesca Zambello. To say the 1989 animated movie (stellar songs by Alan Menken and the late Howard Ashman) was a hit is a bit like saying Jacques Cousteau did a few dives here and there. But when it came to the live version, the obvious problem was how to stage the numerous sections of the film that take place underwater, being as its heroine was a mermaid, her dad was Triton, king of the wet stuff, and that Ariel's best pals were a flounder and that chatty crustacean.

Short of flooding the joint with water and attaching scuba gear to everyone, a Big Metaphor was needed. And there was another complication. Half of the show takes place on land — Ariel is fond of her new shanks and the princely dude whom she spies from her little rock. So it can't just be all underwater. The show needs both.

On Broadway, the big idea was Heelys (footwear with wheels), allowing the actors to, in theory, make like the fishies.

In theory. In practice, and I was there, it was like watching people skating around, arms akimbo, not making much like the fish at all but just looking very self-conscious and weird. The show retained its fine Menken-Ashman score, adding some new Ashman songs with lyrics by Glenn Slater, and was not without some charm, but most people who saw it will tell you that it was too kitschy, failed to commit to the truth of Ariel's beloved seascape and thus didn't work. I've seen "The Little Mermaid" since, and, prior to this past weekend, I'd decided that this show only works in simplified, cut-down versions such as the 75-minute production at Chicago Shakespeare Theater in 2015.

But that's not what the Paramount is doing. Au contraire. This is the full "Little Mermaid" monty and, if you are looking purely at the way production values read, by far the biggest show right now in the entire Chicagoland area for your seasonal entertainment pleasure.

Oh yes, the big idea.

Puppets.

Yep. Instead of an actor playing, say, Sebastian, you get an actor holding or otherwise manipulating a puppet (all superbly designed by Jesse Mooney-Bullock) that is Sebastian. As adroitly manipulated by Mak's cast, these sea creatures thus can actually move with some measure of aquatic veracity and, better yet, they also can be carried onto terra firm when plot demands. It's not an original concept, of course, in that it actually borrows from the way Disney handled Timon the meerkat and Zazu the hornbill in "The Lion King." But "The Lion King" was a Disney masterpiece. A fine source, therefore, from which to borrow. The show also brings the audience closer to the sensibility of the animated source, but, just in case any Disney lawyers are reading, Mooney-Bullock has carved out very original versions of those beloved characters. They're close enough for the kids in the audience to recognize and believe in, but also come with wholly original looks. Those visual creations — believe me, they're worth driving out for, all on their own, especially when augmented by the costumes of Theresa Ham — are really something and are the show's strongest asset.

That's along with Jonathan Butler- Duplessis, whose cranky potential crabcake is the star of this show — which is no slight to Kari Yancy's beautifully sung Ariel. Disney princesses are sacred territory in many households, and Yancy navigates that tricky knife edge between acquiring as much agency as possible (Doug Wright penned a book that improved that situation from the film) and delivering the kind of recognizable Ariel that some of the youngest theatergoers have come to see. She's not a puppet, of course, so Mak sticks wires on her back as much as possible, letting her fly through the air like an aquatic Mary Poppins, all to the delight of the squirming occupants of many of the seats.

Yancy's handsome prince is Devin DeSantis, an actor, ahem, a few years past his 21st birthday (unlike his character), but what the heck. He carries it all off with only a hint of the paternalistic, and you certainly feel like Ariel will be happier in the palace than with Christina Hall's many-armed Ursula, another dazzling little visual, augmented by a pair of slithering eel sidekicks, played, slitheringly, by Adam Fane and John Adam Keating.

At the end of the show, you have "The Little Mermaid," of course. "Hamilton," it's not. But this is Mak's best work to date. It's an affordably priced show that takes care not to miss its shot, to deliver everything the audience wants, to take a few big risks and still play to the crowd. It is a very notable achievement for this theater and this still-emerging director, and I guarantee that, should you love a few fans of the movie, you'll all have a blast.

Better yet, it won't feel like someone just stuck the DVD on repeat play. Did I mention there are cool puppets?

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

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Disney's "The Little Mermaid"- 3.5 stars

When: Through Jan. 15

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$44-\$59 at 630-896-6666 or paramountaurora.com

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