Back to the Roots- Inside the Plant

Having read through the latest edition of the Ousel, I found this at the end of my report on playing Richard Hannay in *The 39 Steps*:

‘‘I can’t wait to sink my teeth into another production next year.’’

I realise now that I might have predicted the future unexpectedly.

When I was cast in early September to voice the rip-roaring singing bloodthirsty Venus Flytrap, Audrey II, in the musical *Little Shop of Horrors*, I was thrilled. It was certainly a challenging role, as it’s entirely voice-based, but the plant has all bark and even more bite; it would be a gripping character to play. It possesses a scorching soul voice that lures the unwilling protagonist to doom, and teeth as sharp as its wit.

Let me explain in more detail. The show is set on the impoverished Skid Row in New York in ‘an early year of a decade not too long before our own,’ (most likely the 1960s), and focuses on Seymour Krelborn (Dylan Swain). Life is hard for him and his grumpy boss, Mr Mushnik (Harvey Bolger), as they struggle to make ends meet in Mushnik’s wilting florist shop. Added to that, Seymour’s crush, Audrey (Laura Ellis), who works at the shop, desperately wants to get away from her sadistic, motorcycle-riding, nitrous-oxide snorting goon of a boyfriend, Orin Scrivello, D.D.S (Oscar Hill). When Mushnik announces the shop’s closure, Seymour brings out what he thinks is ‘a strange and interesting plant,’ (but in reality it’s an alien life-form) that attracts business as soon as it’s put in the window. Seymour affectionately names the plant ‘Audrey II,’ after his co-worker. However, the only way for this plant to grow is if Seymour feeds it blood. Lots of fresh blood. Seymour relents, driven by dreams of success, and the unfortunate Orin (who has already laughed himself to death after inhaling too much gas) becoming Audrey II’s next victim. But then the Faustian deal wherein Seymour achieves fame if the plant is fed becomes too much to handle. I won’t spoil the ending, but the bodies start to pile up…

Personally, the show is one of my favourite musicals. Written by Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, it’s a hypnotic blend of dark humour, amazing songwriting, and 1950’s horror film conventions. Pick up a copy of the soundtrack or the 1986 film- you’ll be humming the songs everywhere, I promise you. The rehearsal process started in the third week of September- the newly assembled cast had only 8 weeks to get the show up and running. Under the able baton of Mr Bantock, we and the band arduously learnt the songs, with Tom Arnold providing accompaniments in his Assistant MD role. Mrs Millington and Mr Leven helped us discover inner energy and worked with us on every scene, making sure the beasts inside ourselves were fed and watered.

There was a very different beast to tackle, however. In most productions, the plant is not played abstractly by an actor on stage (take a look at the Regent’s Park Open Air Theatre’s version to see this very different and exciting take on the show), rather, 4 puppets are used at different stages of its growth. Three require one-man manipulation, the last needs a team of five to control vines, its curling lip, and, of course, its giant gaping maw. That’s not to say the first three aren’t hard to do. The third pod (which comes in during the latter half of Act 1), is four foot high, and is played by a person perching in the plant pot, moving the jaws up and down with both hands. This is, naturally, hot, tiring and sweaty work, and Blue Galtos and George Wegener, on alternate nights, performed extremely admirably at this demanding task. We spent hours getting the lip syncs right, as the plant’s rhythms of speech are varied, complex, and deliciously evil to boot.

The big boy was another creature altogether. George Robertson (Stage Manager), Purdey Blackstock, Ben Smith, Ciaran Zanna, Murray Silk and Tom Hayward, and the aforementioned Blue and George, while helping backstage, controlled this fearsome monster. I could feel the sweat pouring off them backstage when I sat 10 feet above them with the band, and I suddenly realised that for all the tricky singing that the role demands, I had the easy job. They seemed to be incessantly pulling ropes, switching levers and doing everything possible to make the plant look as realistic as a 10-ton carnivorous avocado could. Overall, the synergy between myself and every puppeteer was slick, polished and precise every night, and helped to create the illusion that the plant was alive and looking for its next meal.

So why did I enjoy the role? Simply put, it’s nothing like anything else in theatre. Imagine voicing a rock-and-rollin’, growling, foul-mouthed, savage mean green mother from outer space for four performances. All your inhibitions are let go, and you get to let loose, letting your primal nature flow through you- it’s extremely cathartic if you commit entirely to the role of this funky baddie who is literally all mouth. This was only heightened by the dazzling lights of Mr Tearle and Alex Steele, the fantastic, vine-entangled, two-tiered set by Mr Leven and Mr Pharoah, and, of course, the band. Oh, the band. They set the audience ablaze with energy every night, flaunting their numerous and apparent talents from the klezmer flourishes of ‘Mushnik and Son,’ to the thumping drums and percussion in ‘Feed Me,’ and the bombastic beat of Orin’s ode to pain ‘Be A Dentist!’

I couldn’t have been able to complete this feat however, without the support of the brilliant cast, who functioned as a coherent unit, working harmoniously throughout the sometimes stressful eight weeks of rehearsals, singing until our voices were hoarse, and juggling notes, individual performances, and Mr Bantock’s omnipresent face on a monitor above us. The plant is an invaluable role for anyone who wants to pursue voice-acting, and it was more than I could have ever imagined. From the sassy Ronettes (Jess Wallace, Bea Anderson, Alice Munn and Ella Turner), who were ready to meet anyone with crackling humour, to the pain-obsessed Orin (I assure readers that Oscar Hill is the sweetest guy in real life, but with forceps in his hands, he’s pretty scary, to Dylan himself as a nerdy, bumbling Seymour who sacrifices himself (in vain), everyone should be extremely proud of what they’ve done to make the show the best that the school has seen. Thanks should also go to Mrs Millington and Mr Leven for directing and producing the show, and their extensive time and support.

Oh, one more thing…

FEEEEEEEEEDDDD MEEEEEE!

*Audrey II (aka Jamie Williams) 06/12/19*