

Review of Cherry County Playhouse Production of “Little Shop of Horrors”  
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By Robert Hubbard  
Theatre Professor at Northwestern College

Looking for a good recipe for musical theatre? Try two parts romance, a shot of black comedy, a dash of R&B, and a healthy sprinkling of 1950s McCarthyism. Bake for about two hours in the Cherry County play-oven, and wah lah, out pops the grotesquely funny musical comedy, “Little Shop of Horrors.” Based on the 1960 Roger Corman cult film, this macabre little musical about a man-eating plant will surely serve up playhouse audiences with some delightful dinner conversation.

A definite departure from traditional musical theatre fare, the plot of “Little Shop” centers on a pathetic yet sweet assistant florist named Seymour. Aided by the mysterious power of a solar eclipse, Seymour stumbles upon a new breed of plant. He names his creation Audrey II after his co-worker and the girl of his dreams. A cross between a Venus flytrap and a crocodile, Audrey II quickly shows a taste for human flesh. With designs on world domination, it devours every “body” who stands in its way.

For the most part, the actors do a good job of portraying the quirky yet sympathetic characters who inhabit this musical comedy. In the role of Seymour, Gilles Chiasson effectively shows the lovable and conflicted nature of the nerdy protagonist. Likewise, Vince Trani earns his share of laughs as the crusty flower-store owner, Mr. Mushnik.

Bill Whitefield gives a good turn as the abusive and sadistic Dr. Orin Scavelo, D.D.S., although he does not seem to fully capture the “over-the-top” sadomasochism of this politically incorrect character. As the voice of Audrey II, James Alexander compensates for Whitefield’s hesitancy. Alexander, who is especially strong vocally, relishes Audrey II’s every evil phrase with dark and irreverent humor.

But by far the most memorable performance in the production comes from Danica Conner’s portrayal of the blue collar Audrey. With a perfect New York dialect, Conner achieves the difficult task of making Audrey’s dreams of moving to the suburbs with Seymour both comic and sympathetic. Her passionate and sensitive rendition of the song “Suddenly Seymour” turns into the highlight of the show.

A highly creative feature of “Little Shop” involves the ever-present appearance of three back-up singers. Much like a Greek chorus, these three R&B style performers narrate, witness and participate in most of the action of the musical. Played effectively by Edye Evans Hyde, Ashanti Johnson, and Michelle Pereira, the trio provides some of the show’s best music. Director and choreographer Bill Castellino does a particularly creative job staging their scenes.

As expected, the design elements of the show prove strong. Peter Hick’s wacky scene design serves the production well, as does Aaron Spivey’s flashy lighting design. Spivey’s lightning

streaks during several of the transitions stand out as appropriately campy. Likewise, Barbara Jenk's colorful costumes comically enhance each of the characterizations.

A real strength of the show's overall design can be seen in selection of stage properties. An area not usually discussed in reviews, the props in "Little Shop" really helped set the comic tone. Highlights include the garbage-can lids that look like dental plates, the medieval looking dental equipment, and Dr. Orin Scavelo's space-age looking laughing gas mask. Properties master Christopher Schneider deserves extra-credit for the many creative touches his work lends to the production.

As a final thought, "Little Shop of Horrors" provides a refreshing diversion to the standard "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back" musical theatre formula. Aside from being darn funny, there is actually quite a bit of substance to this unique piece of theatre. It plays upon the 1950s anti-Communist hysteria that dark forces are infiltrating our society. It also offers a critique of the American dream, especially the compulsion to flee the city for the suburbs. These themes run through the production in a playful and non-didactic way. It's nice to know that, like Audrey II's victims, "Little Shop of Horrors" has some meat on its bones.