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Two-Faced

Palo Alto Players puts R.L.S.'s 'Jekyll & Hyde' to music

By Marianne Messina

BACK IN THE DAY, when we still believed the human psyche had only two warring natures to deal with, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Although the modern soap opera has taught us that five or 10 personalities are even more fun, Frank Wildhorn's pop-oriented score and sassy, updated lyrics by Leslie Bricusse make for a full-bodied musical, *Jekyll & Hyde*. The Palo Alto Players' production, with its dark catwalk and patchwork of gray, angular drops, shadowed by an ever-present fog, offers something to sink your teeth into (not to mix metaphors with Wildhorn's musical *Dracula*). People who like nice heroes and happy endings, shield your eyes. As you might suspect, *Jekyll & Hyde* has neither of the above, but the Players keep most of the horror show biz stylized, and Hyde (Cliff McCormick playing Jekyll/Hyde) is more the smoldering demon who roars on occasion than the hopped-up aggro king the lyrics threaten.

In the story, Dr. Henry Jekyll conducts his experiments in the interests of saving his father from mental illness, though Dad, on a gurney, one presumes straitjacketed to oblivion, could as well be brain damaged or catatonic if you don't read the notes. A little obsessed with this work, Dr. Jekyll is not high on the social set's list of choice marriage material, especially when he has chosen London's "pearl" who should marry an earl (as the song goes), Emma Carew (Collette R. Phelps). But like all good heroines, she is marrying for love, and in the (beautiful) duet "Take Me as I Am," she makes it clear she knew there'd be a price to pay.

After he downs a yummy-looking red potion, Dr. Henry Jekyll finds himself undergoing some changes. Playing the split personality, McCormick has the chops to carry a lot of ground-covering solos and beautiful duets—with fiancée Emma as well as dance-hall girl Lucy Harris (Melissa T. O'Keefe)—not to mention the roaring Mr. Hyde (he assaults and batters a few vocal cords). In the "Goth musical" family along with *Sweeny Todd*, this show could easily be campy, trashy and gory. But director George Quick takes the high road, which is actually refreshing. He has also chosen talent that can deliver his sweeter vision. With appealing blue eyes and operatic girth, McCormick has the ability to transfix an audience. His voice, in the soft upper range, is one of those rare ones that can sing a whisper, forcing your attention. And adding just a sprinkle of the balladeer's gravelly voice he can shift into regret, sadness or desire.

Both he and O'Keefe have that *je ne sais quoi* in their voices that projectS something rare and fragile. In O'Keefe, Quick seems to have gone for something a little less brassy and a lot more touching. As she sings "Bring on the Men" ("I like to have a man for breakfast each day"),



Photograph by Joyce

Goldschmid

The doctor is in: Dr. Jekyll (Cliff McCormick) carries his experiments too far at Palo Alto Players.

Lucy's black-leather bustier with the jeweled insets tells everything about her: sensual, toughened, alternative, sparkling, a gem (Mary H. Cravens, costume design). And like powerful bookends, these two personalities (the only ones wearing bold red) color the show.

In between, there are scattered imperfections, but in odd ways, many of them work in the show's favor. True to its roots, the musical lets the faithful fiancée (Phelps) get upstaged by the yearning dance-hall girl, just as Phelps' fuller, more consistent voice is eclipsed by the plaintive bell tones of O'Keefe's. Actually, the ladies' duet brings out the very best in both qualities; it's a breath holder as they sing from their different worlds about wanting the same man (or their respective fantasies of Jekyll) to come back to them.

Jekyll & Hyde, a Palo Alto Players production, plays Wednesday-Saturday at 8pm and Sunday at 2:30pm through May 13 at the Lucie Stern Theater, 1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto. Tickets are \$20-\$30. (650.329.0891)

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