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Drama

September 25, 2008

### *Shrek: Ugly Musical Shows True Inner Beauty*

It all began with a quest for true love. On Sunday September 20, 2008, as a rainy Seattle afternoon drizzled outside, I made my way to the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Theatre for the pre-Broadway transfer of Dreamworks Theatricals' *Shrek: The Musical*. The stunning Chinese inspired décor of the theatre provides an interesting background for the green fantasy land created by set and costume designer Tim Hatley and lighting designer Hugh Vanstone. A plethora of small children wearing Shrek and Princess Fiona ears litter the aisles. As the houselights began to fade, Jeanine Tesori's beautiful music and the book and lyrics by David Lindsay-Abaire transport us to a different world: a world where it is not what is on the outside that matters, but the true spirit and inner beauty that shines through. For the next two and a half hours, director Jason Moore and choreographer Josh Prince takes us on a journey which follows Shrek and Princess Fiona through the land of 'Far Far Away' on a quest to find love and acceptance. Along the way, they must battle dragons, magical spells, overbearing rulers who are short on temper, and even look within themselves to find true love. This brilliant production is led by the stunning performances of Brian D'Arcy-James as Shrek and the phenomenally talented Sutton Foster as Princess Fiona.

Director Jason Moore has done a remarkable job assembling a brilliant cast who have a true gift for comic timing and character vocal work. The standout of the show is Brian D'Arcy-James and his revolutionary portrayal of Shrek. D'Arcy-James has the difficult task of playing a role so brilliantly made famous by Mike Myers in the feature film version. An actor with lesser experience may have chosen to just copy what Myers did in the film, but D'Arcy-James makes the wise choice to create his own Shrek, far more complex and deep than the original cartoon version. His spot-on Irish brogue and brilliant costume help to transport the story into our imaginations. His voice is brilliantly showcased in the songs "Who I'd Be" and "I Think I Got You Beat". From the way he loafes around the stage to his subtle but telling facial expressions when passing gas, D'Arcy-James has done an amazing job creating a well rounded and complex character.

Also of special note is Chester Gregory as Donkey. Again, Gregory has the difficult task of recreating a role that will forever be tied to Eddie Murphy's portrayal in the cartoon. Gregory relies heavily on the Murphy influence yet still tries to make the role his own. Where Murphy's Donkey was "you don't give me no sass", Gregory's is a little too "girl, where'd you get that weave – it looks FAB-u-lous on you". Nevertheless, he provides a strong antithesis to balance both Shrek and Fiona's characters. Gregory exceeds all vocal expectations in his second act power ballad, "Make A Move". His voice is finely suited to this sort of rock gospel revival sort of song. This role gives him a chance to show off his amazing vocal prowess and comic

timing. With time I'm sure he will find the right balance of wise-cracking donkey and fabulous best friend with three snaps up and a snarky comment on the side.

As with most fairy tales, *Shrek* needs a villain to spoil the victories of the protagonists and generally stir up trouble. This villain is brilliantly found in Christopher Sieber as Lord Farquaad. Sieber performs the entire show on his knees thus giving him a diminutive stature. His acting, however, is far from falling short. Throughout the show, Sieber manipulates not only his body, but also his voice to give Farquaad both a powerful presence which makes fairy tale creatures tremble and a whining childlike cry than could annoy even the hard of hearing. He is best showcased in the number "The Ballad of Farquaad" in which he laments his family's past and how he has arrived in this 'grumpy' situation. Sieber provides the perfect balance of comedy and villainy to propel the storyline and give Shrek and Fiona something to struggle against.

By far the star of *Shrek* is Sutton Foster as Fiona. Her stunning stage presence and radiant beauty fit perfectly with this role. Even while being green and farting and burping, she still manages to let her glowing presence shine through. Her comic timing is impeccable (as seen in her duet with D'Arcy-James "I Got You Beat") and she is in fine voice with this production (as seen in her first act power ballad "I Know It's Today"). In addition, Foster gets to showcase not only her powerhouse belt, but also her fine tap dancing ability in the second act opener, "Morning Person". Foster's Fiona is a deeply complex character who the audience gets to watch struggle through her own personal journey for true love. She is a true heroine in every sense of the word.

In addition to strong acting performances, the technical elements of this show do not disappoint. Girl group mice, cross-dressing wolves and ginger bread cookies led through dazzling choreography by Josh Prince. The tap dancing rats that open act II are nothing short of brilliant. This is set upon the scenic backdrops and set pieces of Tim Hatley who wisely chose to incorporate three interlocking turntables to seamlessly move set pieces on and off stage. The costumes also delineate the fantasy world these characters inhabit. They are reminiscent of the original cartoon, yet unique all unto themselves. The intelligent lighting by Hugh Vanstone helps to move the story along and allows the audience to focus on the truly important elements of the story. The sound also seamlessly incorporates prerecorded sound effects into the spoken dialogue.

*Shrek* is enjoyable for family members of all ages. It is the must see theatrical event of the new Broadway season and is well worth the ticket price. Led by the stunning Sutton Foster and refreshing Brian D'Arcy-James, the cast manages to create a mythical world where magic and dreams really do come true. Perhaps the most important quality of this production is the moral lesson it teaches: the true beauty is what is inside a person. Isn't that what we truly want children to walk away with? Well that and overpriced souvenir Shrek ears.