

'Beauty and the Beast'

BY NATHALIE MORNU

Belles star in two pieces of theater this month—one hails from France, the others are a dozen of Southern belles. But whereas the first production will delight children and adults alike, the latter is intended for a mature audience.

(Rated G) The Flat Rock Playhouse presents *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*, which reminds audiences that it's what's on the inside that counts. Based on the animated cartoon, the musical tells the story of Belle, a smart young woman in a small town. Belle longs for adventures like the ones in the volumes she devours.

"Belle is sort of a dreamer," says Holly Rone, who stars in the role. "She loves books, loves reading."

Although she doesn't quite fit in, a cad named Gaston wants to marry the gorgeous Belle, but she rejects him, wanting, instead, someone who will understand her aspirations.

As her father Maurice travels alone to a fair, he comes across a castle. Earlier, a beggar woman had stopped there, asking for shelter, and been turned away by the prince because of her haggard appearance. Her ugliness melted away, revealing a beautiful enchantress; she warned the prince that looks can deceive and she turned him into a hideous Beast. His faithful servants, transformed into household objects, have holed up with the Beast, who's ashamed of his monstrous countenance.

Buried under costume, wig and makeup, Chris Lynn performs as the Beast.

"He's cloaked in an unfamiliar and limiting exterior, and he has to learn to deal with it," says Lynn. "He's a victim of his own temper. That's the way he relates to everyone."

To break the enchantment, the Beast must fall in love with another and earn love in return, or be doomed to eternally remain a Beast.

When Maurice discovers the castle's spellbound inhabitants, the angry Beast takes him prisoner. Belle, anxiously searching for her father, finds him incarcerated and offers herself in exchange for his release. The Beast accepts.

He eventually becomes enamored of Belle, but fears to admit it. Instead, he gives her a magic mirror that allows her to view events in the village. Belle sees that the vengeful Gaston plans to send Maurice to an asylum. The Beast allows Belle to leave so she can help her father. The young woman, however, slips up, betraying the existence of the Beast to her rebuffed suitor, who leads a violent mob to



"Don't judge a book by its cover," the love between Belle and the Beast shows that exterior appearances prove nothing about what's inside. Photo courtesy of Flat Rock Playhouse

destroy the monster. Gaston succeeds in mortally stabbing the Beast.

The dying Beast tells Belle of his happiness at seeing her one time more, and she answers that she loves him.

"[Belle] sees through the cover that he lives in, and sees his humanity," says Lynn.

The stage version develops the couple's relationship more fully than the film, so while children will delight in the humor, magic and songs, adults

can appreciate the depth of its storyline. The Beast charms Belle, explains Rone, with his kind acts, such as giving her his enormous library and returning her freedom.

"That sacrifice endears him to her," Rone says. "She's lonely in the village, and she sees [loneliness] in him. I think that's where the connection stems from, having that common bond."

Other than Disney's Broadway and touring production, the Flat Rock is the second in the nation to produce the Tony Award-winning musical.

"It's the most spectacular show, from a technical production standpoint, that I think we've ever done," says Paige Posey, the show's director.

"It's the largest cast we've ever

had. Dennis Mulden is the scenic designer, and he's absolutely outdone himself. The costumes are amazing." For the foam armatures, Costume Designers Bridget Bartlett and Janet Gray have received the aid of Lisa Sturz, whose credits include Henson's Creature Shop, the Ice Capades and Walt Disney's Imagineering. Illusionist Rob Lake, who has worked with David Copperfield, joined the production staff of 23.

"I just want everyone to come out and see what the cast and crew have been able to accomplish," Posey said during rehearsals. "The cast is amazing. They've learned [the play] so fast, and they've committed so fully." She pauses. "It's going to be so beautiful."