

'Little Shop' could use a bit more comic bite

La Mirada staging of witty musical is still a lot of fun

By Thomas O'Connor
The Register

Life has few sureties, but it's a reasonably safe bet no one, ever, will write a better musical about a jive-talking, man-eating, monster plant than "Little Shop of Horrors."

In transforming a cheapie Roger Corman horror flick — of all improvable sources — into a musical as goofily engaging as it is dark in comedy, Howard Ashman and Alan Menken gave the notion of camp an inexplicably classy new spin.

Their musical hybrid ran more than three years on Broadway and in a hysterical 1983 production at the Westwood Playhouse. Last year's film version may have completed an only in America circle (from quickie flick to Broadway musical to big film musical), but it monkeyed with the cheerful black humor of Ashman's intentionally silly book, even changing the ending to one of human, rather than monster-beat-on-world-dominion, triumph.

Happily, La Mirada Civic Theatre has brought "Little Shop" back to the stage this week in its "Broadway Season" series. The occasion would be even happier if Glenn Casale's new production had a bit more — you should pardon the expression — bite to it. But even a "Little Shop" that's a little off is an awful lot of fun.

The titular star here is Gordon Jump, of TV's "WKRP in Cincinnati." Perhaps, in light of Jump's mugginess, tentative performance Wednesday night, it's just as well his role as a greedy flower shop owner on Skid Row is at best tertiary.

The secondary stars are Richard Hochberg as Seymour, a definitively nerdy dweeb with a green thumb he turns red by feeding blood to a plant, and Joan Ryan as Audrey, an equally definitive dumb blonde with a great heart, vapid dreams of a matchbox home in the suburbs, and rotten taste in men (she dates a sadistic, leather-clad dentist, but, as Audrey notes, "It's tough to meet nice boys when you live on Skid Row").

"Little Shop's" real star is the infamous Audrey II, the carnivorous plant Seymour nurtures, with steady doses of human plantfood, from teeny to gargantuan to outofcontrol. If the premise sounds abysmal, you have to imagine the whole thing wrapped inside Menken's delicious score, a musical Chinese menu of '50s and '60s rock styles, and Ashman's spittingly witty lyrics that invariably have the singers' tongues protruding from their cheeks.

Much of the very best music is detailed to a rocking trio of black ladies (Karole Foreman, Terrah Smith and the formidable Lita Gaithers). One of Ashman/Menken's several high-camp inspirations was to see rock's classic girlgroups as the Greek chorus of the '60s.

Ever-growing, ever-ravenous Audrey II, who comes to resemble an intimidatingly pregnant peach, is in very good hands at La Mirada (Lisa Aimee Sturz designed her various, swelling incarnations and operates the puppets; Dan Tullis Jr. gives her excellent voice). Ryan and Hochberg, too, are a lovely voiced pair of young heroes, and neither slices from the giddy extravagance "Little



Seymour (Richard Hochberg) is confronted with a plant that's big and keeps getting bigger in the La Mirada production of 'Little Shop of Horrors.'

REVIEW

What: "Little Shop of Horrors," book and lyrics by Howard Ashman, music by Alan Menken.
Where: La Mirada Civic Theatre, 14900 La Mirada Blvd., La Mirada.
Features: Gordon Jump, Joan Ryan, Richard Hochberg.
Behind the scenes: Directed by Glenn Casale.
Continues: Through May 24. At 8 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sunday.
How much: \$14.50-\$18.50.
Call: 994-6310 or (213) 944-9801.
Suitability: Not appropriate for young children.

Shop" demands. Ryan, who looks perfect, spilling out of her black micro-mini, hasn't quite gotten Audrey's deadpan irony down, but it's still a very funny performance.

La Mirada's version should prove strongest in its musical aspects (Dennis Castellano leads the four-piece offstage band), once some messy opening-night problems of balance get solved (the miking was lopsided, and the mixing turned most of the large, brassier moments to mush — nearly all the funny female's lyrics were unintelligible).

But this "Little Shop" seems sorely under-rehearsed. Casale's production lacks comic snap, some of which is due to Jump, who wanders around as if at a first read-through and mugs more often than a Skid Row hood on welfare-check day. Peter Heuchling is amiable in a small litany of supporting roles, but that's off the mark: his sadistic dentist has little malevolent glee.

Some of Ashman's best jokes are missing their connections, and, while things might improve with playing over the next two weeks, for now it feels like a Bloody Mary minus not only the vodka but also the Tabasco.