

Vox Lumiere fascinates with quasi-modern 'Hunchback'

PERFORMANCE REVIEW: Show fuses rock opera, silent film

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RICHARDSON – Great works of art call out for new interpretations. That's the case with Vox Lumiere's fascinating rock opera *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, performed Saturday night at the Eisemann Center.

Victor Hugo's sprawling 1831 masterpiece – set in 1482 Paris – inspired a haunting 1923 silent film, and 84 years later, Vox Lumiere complements the silent, two-dimensional film with a rock band, opera singers and dancers. The result: one long, multidimensional, high-decimal blast of visual and auditory splendor.

Few people today have the patience to watch a two-hour silent film, so in keeping with the times, composer Kevin Saunders Hayes brings the story back to the stage, but with a twist.



Looming over a third of the stage, the grainy, more-brown-than-black film transports audience members to a somber, Gothic cathedral. In front of the screen, two iron platforms sit on opposite sides of the stage for the eight-member rock band, with the stage's middle area used for dancers and singers to make their dramatic entrances. The lighting appropriately changes from a threatening reddish glow to semidarkness with an occasional shaft of white light, giving the effect of a stage lighted by the flickering of candles.

The music captures the mood of every scene, quickly turning from bells and chants to hard-rock grating ferocity, and then back to plaintive melodies. The singers represent the voices of the main characters: the grotesque hunchback Quasimodo, the high-spirited gypsy girl Esmeralda, the dashing Capt. Phoebos and the angry Chopin – conveying their essence rather than their physical beings.

Looking slightly Goth in black T-shirts and chains or red leggings and tiny shorts, the singers may look like any rock group, but their voices have an operatic richness and purity.

Adding stage movement to accompany a film is a tricky enterprise, since the two can easily compete. There are times when the eye can't take it all in, but director/choreographers Frit and Frat Fuller wisely keep the dancing to no more than an upward thrust of the arm, a hip gyration or two, and sideways sidles.

As impressive as the singers are, the real star remains the film's Lon Chaney as Quasimodo, despised for his ugliness and yet heartbreakingly human. And there are also the visual effects – the sinister Notre Dame, the rabid ant heap of the bustling crowd, and the contrasting image of the perfumed, gorgeously attired Phoebos.

Hunchback is already an intense film; this rock-opera simply ups the ante.

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