



"Beauty Wakes" is Pure Magic

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by James Sims

There is something magical afoot at the Kirk Douglas Theatre as a wondrously imaginative collaboration between Deaf West Theatre and the Center Theatre Group is making a World Premiere in the form of *Sleeping Beauty Wakes*, a New Musical Fable.

When last together, both Deaf West and CTG delivered a multiple Tony Award-winning revival of *Big River*, and if their current efforts make a well-deserved move to Broadway, there is sure to be a wealth of accolades.

The innovative nature of a Deaf West production lies in their interpretation of standard talking plays into a weaving of sign language and speaking parts, which if not seen before, is a masterful work of art. Witnessing the conveyance of nearly all emotions through nothing more than expressions and signing is a play going delicacy.

Breaking down *Beauty Wakes* into its individual parts reveals three drastically different layers that each find a way to beautifully meld on stage into a seamless musical, including the sign language aspect along with a reworking of a familiar story and the drastically current nature of the musical score.

Everything old is new again in this modern imagining of the timeless fairytale story of a princess cursed to endless sleep until a prince awakens her slumber with a kiss, thanks to a clever book by Tony Award-winner [Rachel Sheinkin](#) (*The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*). Aside from updating the Mother Goose tale, now placing Beauty (Alexandria Wailes) in a sleep disorder clinic, the heroine no longer feels a connection with The Prince (Troy Kotsur), opting instead to wait for a truer love, in the form of a narcoleptic orderly (Russell Harvard).

Now here is where the story takes a slightly abstract turn, as the well-known fairytale is flashed back and forth through dream sequences from the slumbering princess, revealing that much of the familiar plot lines - specifically fairies bestowing gifts upon the newborn royalty, with a Bad Fairy (Deanne Bray) cursing the child to die from the prick of a spindle, only to have a final spell used to alter the wicked destiny from death to sleep - are kept in tact with a slight twist.

With Beauty having a shared romance with the Groundskeeper's Son (Harvard), the King (Clinton Derricks-Carroll) punishes these two lovers by keeping them apart. So upon slipping into a now nearly 900 year sleep, once Prince Charming makes his move, no longer are butterflies felt, rather Beauty refuses to awake, leading her father to magically remain youthful as long as his daughter is caught in the spell.





Flash to once upon a time finding itself smack in the middle of the less enchanting world of modern times. A sleeping clinic Director (Bray), conducting studies on various disorders, receives Beauty from her father who hopes something can finally be done about his daughter. In stumbles the Orderly who shares Beauty's infectious dreams of forbidden love with her long-dead lover, ultimately sharing an accidental kiss that revives the princess and causes a few conflicts in her wake.

Director-choreographer [Jeff Calhoun](#) (*Grey Gardens*, *Big River*) is one of two genius aspects of *Beauty Wakes*, crafting a masterpiece of staged excellence, blending the split cast of deaf

and hearing actors into a stunning visual experience. With many of the speaking actors lending their voices to their deaf counterparts, it is astounding to witness the affecting performances each of the deaf actors exudes. These unheard thespians have the most to say, and rightfully so, are cast in the leading roles of Beauty, Clinic Director/Bad Fairy, Prince Charming and Orderly/Groundskeeper's Son.

As the title character, Wailes (*Big River*) is an angelic presence on stage, touching and detailed in her portrayal of a confused teenage princess longing for everything both modern and long ago worlds have to offer. Her performance, along with every deaf actor in *Beauty Wakes*, is amplified through sign more than any vocally projected act could hope to accomplish, and Wailes emerges as a leading star.

Picking up two roles, both love interests of Beauty, Harvard joins the rank of deaf actors transcending any perceived limitations due to a lack of speaking lines, capturing the heart of the newly created characters with ease. During a scene where the two lovebirds rekindle their timeless romance on a motorcycle ride, Harvard's ability to shine behind the stunning Wailes is a strong feat. Complimenting Harvard is the voice of Orderly/Groundskeeper's Son, [Brendan Milburn](#).



Bray and Kotsur round out the lead deaf roles, each adding a humorous touch to the production. Bray, performing double duty as Bad Fairy and the Clinic Director, is wickedly delicious as the reclusive evildoer who casts the disastrous spell on the unsuspecting newborn as a result of not receiving an invite to a royal celebration. Truly the diva of the show, Bray's voice is further brought to life by the sinfully fun singing of Erika Amato, who also picks up a role of her own as Night Terror Patient. Kotsur's Shaft-like take on Prince Charming is a groovy joy, as is the Prince's voice provided by [Kevin Earley](#).

In the unique position of both speaking and signing his way through *Beauty Wakes*, Derricks-Carroll (Dreamgirls) is the emotional backbone of the story, full of poignant moments, finding the meaning of true love through his daughter's eyes as he quickly fades into the cheated past.

If the Deaf West contribution to *Beauty Wakes* is not already enough of a reason to appreciate

this new play, the show's musical and lyrical wizards up the ante with a magic all their own. [Valerie Vigoda](#) and [Brendan Milburn](#), of the pop-rock trio Groovelily, once again inject their unique sounds into a theatrical production, having been successful in their recent musical foray with *Striking 12* (A musical look at Hans [Christian Anderson](#)'s fairytale "The Little Match Girl").

Tossing aside the well-worn traditional musical theatre formula, Vigoda and Milburn provide a fantastic argument to the necessity of revitalizing Broadway through its musical modernization. Though there are a small handful of current plays crafted in similar light – [Rent](#) and [Spring Awakening](#) quickly come to mind – in *Beauty Wakes*, the transformation is raised to a higher degree, giving a much needed jolt to the state of the overabundant standard fare currently on stage throughout New York.

With near futuristic instruments in hand, Vigoda and Milburn deliver a mesmerizing musical interpretation, ranging from the R&B styling of "Wake Up Call For Love" – the comical song introducing the pompous Prince Charming – to the charming musical soliloquy in "Only a King" and a rock-infused bitchfest with the Bad Fairy's "Uninvited." If any musical deserved a cast recording, *Beauty Wakes* is just the one to be immortalized with an album pressing.



Stage designs befit a line the Clinic Director utters in describing the senses surrounding a coma revival, where a lack of color is "typical before a coma, everything going to white." [Tobin Ost](#) and [Michael Gilliam](#), as set and light designers, respectively, have created a clinically white palate for the fairytale dreamscapes to vibrantly breakthrough the colorless current day setting.

The catwalk perched above the stage did lead to a few stumbling moments as the actors attempted to swing open a few gates, though along with Maggie Morgan's whimsical costumes, best represented by Bad Fairy's Disney-like robes, the visual charm of *Beauty Wakes*

compliments the already stellar production.

The only foreseeable revisions necessary for an East Coast transplant reside in the book's complexity. With so much alteration to the beloved tale, there are moments when it becomes quite a lot to ask audiences to absorb. The inclusion of characters like Rip Van Winkle, Snow White and Urashima Taro are slightly confusing.

Mostly, there is nothing but accolades to sprinkle on this new musical, as *Beauty Wakes* is a must-see show of the year.

The world premiere production of *Sleeping Beauty Wakes* will play at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City through **May 20**. Ticket prices range from \$20-\$50 and can be purchased by calling 213-628-2772 or on-line at www.CenterTheatreGroup.org. The Kirk Douglas Theatre is located at 9820 Washington Boulevard in Culver City. The production is produced by special arrangement with East of Doheny.

Photos by Craig Schwartz.