

DAILY VARIETY

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TUESDAY, APRIL 10, 2007

Sleeping Beauty Wakes

(Kirk Douglas Theater; 317 seats; \$50 top)

A Center Theater Group and Deaf West Theater presentation of a musical fable in two acts with book by Rachel Sheinkin, music and lyrics by Brendan Milburn and Valerie Vigoda. Directed and choreographed by Jeff Calhoun. Set design, Tobin Ost; costumes, Maggie Morgan; lighting, Michael Gilliam; sound, Eric Snodgrass; production stage manager, William Coiner. Opened, reviewed April 7, 2007. Runs through May 13. Running time: 2 HOURS, 20 MIN.

Beauty/

Princess Rose Alexandria Wailes
Groundskeeper's Son,

Orderly Russell Harvard

King Clinton Derricks-Carroll

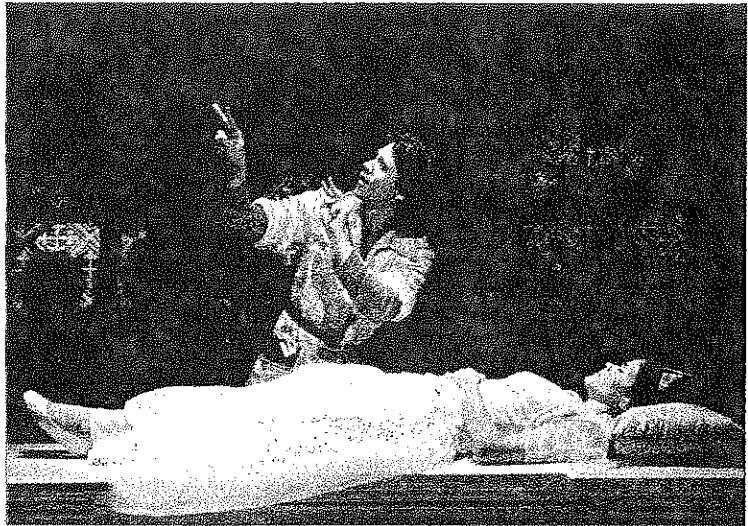
Queen Christia Mantzke

Bad Fairy Deanne Bray

With: Erika Amato, Kevin Earley, Shannon Ford, Troy Kotsur, Brendan Milburn, Valerie Vigoda.

By BOB VERINI

umerous characters in "Sleeping Beauty Wakes," as per Deaf West Theater's company style, are acted and signed by one thesp while being spoken and sung by another. The melding of performances is seamless; it's the narrative that suffers from a split-personality disorder. Show resembles children's theater, but dual plotlines uneasily



Alexandria Wailes as the princess and Russell Harvard as her beau star in "Sleeping Beauty Wakes" at the Kirk Douglas Theater.

coexist to produce an overlong fairy tale too confusingly structured and diffuse for kids' attention. Pleasures are to be found in the fusion of sign language and the spoken or sung word, and in Brendan Milburn and Valerie Vigoda's score, itself an appealing fusion of pop, rock and jazz.

Librettist Rachel Sheinkin ("The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee") initially offers the

Sleeping Beauty tale straight up with a twist. All the Charles Perrault ingredients are here: princess's christening; uninvited Bad Fairy (a sultry, understated turn by Faye Dunaway look-alike Deanne Bray and superb singing partner Erika Amato); cursed spindle; pricked finger; hundred-year snooze.

Twist is that one look at her blue-velvet-wearing, Elvis-impersonating

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Sleeping Beauty Wakes

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Prince (Troy Kotsur) puts Beauty (Alexandria Wailes, more than meriting the moniker) out again for the better part of a millennium, only to wake in the present day with disorientation similar to Robert De Niro's in "Awakenings." Prepped by the encyclopedia and back issues of *People*, she explores the 21st century with her beloved (an utterly winning Russell Harvard), the castle's erstwhile gardener reincarnated as a hospital Candy Striper.

Ah yes, that hospital. Equal time is allotted to the fantasy and the here-and-now, but the stories are seriously unbalanced. As long as the show sticks to the Sleeping Beauty theme and variations, it's captivating and funny.

But once the King (Clinton Derricks-Carroll) transports his still-buzzsawing daughter to an unaccountably American sleep-disorder clinic, a quartet of sufferers make us suffer through indistinctly written, overacted roles and tedious subplots involving their ongoing ailments. And Bray's clinic director is neither villainous nor sympathetic; the character is a cipher.

Judiciously pruning these scenes would relieve the exhausting running time and allow themes of the dream-state of life and the timelessness of true love to come through more clearly.

Plot missteps aside, there's something primal and deeply satisfying about the Deaf West acting style, featuring nonstop signing from all, while voices emanate unpredictably, sometimes from off-stage and other times from within the ensemble. The result is a uniquely collective act of storytelling. Scenes that would play to unexceptional effect in a conventional production, such as the latenight motorcycle ride of Beauty and her beau, become hypnotically affecting in this context.

Scene transitions aren't yet crisp, but in his third company show, helmer Jeff Calhoun has become a master orchestrator of singing, signing, speaking and dance. Show boasts no American Sign Language-related coup like the sudden cessation of accompaniment during "Waiting for the Light

to Shine" in the company's "Big River," but Calhoun takes full advantage of the expressive power of signing to music.

When Derricks-Carroll bemoans the limits of his power in "Only a King," or Wailes and Harvard enact a moonlight swim in "Drifting," their gestures transcend language to become choreography. It's lovely stuff.

Husband-and-wife composers Milburn and Vigoda, two-thirds of the performing trio "Groovelily," apply a fine, uncluttered lyric sense to their beguiling melodies. Their specialty is character songs: Bray and Amato out-wicked "Wicked" in just two menacing numbers, "Uninvited" and "Wheel Goes Round." Stand-alone ballads, especially "Everything Changes but You" and "You Make Me Feel Awake," have commercial potential, while serving the love story perfectly.

If the score mostly impresses as a concept album (a two-CD set at that, given 26 songs and reprises), it's because of a certain sameness that creeps in eventually, as well as a tendency for songs simply to end without a proper musical-comedy button. But as an album, it would be worth playing over and over, and keyboardist Milburn and electric violinist Vigoda — who voice the romantic leads and accompany the cast with percussionist-thesp Shannon Ford — should remain on the radar as both scribes and performers.

Tobin Ost's two-tiered unit set undercuts shifts between legend and contempo life; despite magic provided by Michael Gilliam's lighting and projections, the environment is too modern and metallic to support the fairy-tale elements. Rickety-looking castled stairs fail to alter the stage space materially in their many lateral moves, rising to a catwalk whose gates, flopping open carelessly, make one nervous for Vigoda up there singing, acting and fiddling away.

Maggie Morgan has designed a triumphant velvet-and-feathers cape for the Bad Fairy, and Wailes is stunning in a series of white frocks, but the modern clothes seem unnecessarily cheap and drab. The King's rumpled gold shirt makes him look like a dealer in a cheesy casino; over 1,000 years, couldn't he have come across an iron?