

# LOS ANGELES

by Sharon Perlmutter

## *Sleeping Beauty Wakes*

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of Deaf West Theatre's groundbreaking production of *Big River* was the way in which it paired hearing actors with deaf actors in related roles. When, for example, a slave (played by a deaf actress) signed a song while her mother (played by a hearing actress) sang it beside her, the issue of who was interpreting for whom was truly in the eye of the beholder.

No such parity is present in *Sleeping Beauty Wakes*, Deaf West's new musical, having its world premiere at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. The signing characters take center stage. When someone else is speaking for a signing character, the speaker is not playing a related part, but is simply playing the "Voice of" the signing character. (Indeed, at one point, Valerie Vigoda - a hearing performer who plays the voice of Sleeping Beauty - *signs* the role of Snow White while *someone else* provides the voice.)

By relegating the "voice of" performers to the wings (they're visible, but rarely share the same performance space as the signing performers), *Sleeping Beauty Wakes* asks its signing actors to carry the bulk of the visual elements of the performance. And it correspondingly asks its hearing audience members to stop trying to figure out where the voice is coming from, and just *watch*.

Happily, the performers are up to the task, providing a visually engaging production, even for the non-ASL speakers in the crowd. Alexandria Wailes is a feisty, playful Sleeping Beauty. You only have to watch the way she slowly sways her upper body when shaking a finger to know that *this* Beauty is a teenager who won't take any crap from anyone. But Wailes tempers Beauty's headstrong ways with a joyful smile that is instantly endearing. Also outstanding is Deanne Bray, whose signing as the Bad Fairy is absolutely magnetic. Bray dominates the stage in the Bad Fairy's rockin' evil number, "Uninvited"; her presence would captivate even in silence. And Troy Kotsur knocks 'em dead as the Prince who thinks he's much more Charming than he actually is.

Of course, it certainly doesn't hurt that Erika Amato is powering her way through the Bad Fairy's "Uninvited" on the vocals - or that Kevin Earley voices the Prince's smooth groove, "Wake Up Call For Love," with his very best Barry White. It is when *Sleeping Beauty Wakes* combines a solid character-driven song with a stellar signed performance *and* a complementary vocal that this show really hits the heights.

It doesn't happen quite as often as it should. While a great deal of the songs, by Groovelily's Brendan Milburn and Valerie Vigoda, are musically varied and lyrically intelligent, some are undistinguished. Particularly unremarkable are the duets between Beauty and her true love. Unfortunately, many of the small songs that musicalize moments that are wholly unnecessary to the story (such as an adorable fast-paced comic number in which the palace servants change the diaper of an infant Beauty) are more memorable than some of the songs that are essential to it.

The book, by Rachel Sheinkin, also has problems. The story posits that Sleeping Beauty chose to stay asleep rather than marry the jerk of a prince whose kiss was intended to wake her. It then has Beauty remain asleep for 900 more years, until she is taken to a present-day sleep disorder clinic where she is ultimately awakened. Combining the traditional fairy tale with a modern day conclusion is cute, but Sheinkin needlessly complicates the story with subplots that serve only to confuse some of the younger audience members. ("Dad, what's narcolepsy?" was overheard at intermission.) Indeed, the show hasn't made a firm decision as to whether it is aimed at children or adults. Many of the show's crisp, smart lyrics will be lost on children, yet some of the show's characters (particularly the sleep clinic patients) are drawn so broadly, they can only truly survive in Children's Theatre.

The problems with *Sleeping Beauty Wakes* have nothing to do with its use of deaf and hearing performers. Instead, the creative team has to decide what the show is supposed to be, and pare it down accordingly - making a show that's worthy of the substantial talent gathered to perform it.