

LOS ANGELES

Sleeping Beauty Wakes

Reviewed By: Jonas Schwartz



Russell Harvard and Alexandria Wailes
in *Sleeping Beauty Wakes*
(© Craig Schwartz)

Sleeping Beauty Wakes, the new co-production by Deaf West Theater and the Center Theater Group, is neither a conventional play nor a musical. It is however, a true theatrical experience -- a work of art, talent, and humor in which the combination of deaf and speaking actors feels completely organic.

The book, by Tony Award winner Rachel Sheinkin, is derived in part from the classic fairy tale. Princess Rose (enacted and signed by Alexandria Wailes, voiced and sung by Valerie Vigoda) has been born with a curse over her head: A spiteful fairy (Deanne Bray, voiced and sung by Erika Amato), furious that she had not been deemed pretty enough to be invited to

Rose's christening, commands that a poisonous spindle will kill the princess.

So Rose grows up in a metaphorical cage, protected from any danger, only to become rebellious. Despite her parents' efforts, she is drawn to the spindle and eventually falls into a great sleep for 1,000 years.

Centuries later, we meet a frosty doctor (Bray and Amato again) who runs a sleep clinic with a narcoleptic orderly (Russell Harvard, voiced and sung by Brendan Milburn). Rose's father (Clinton Derricks-Carroll), who has traded powers and finances to stay alive long enough to see his daughter awaken, brings Rose to the clinic. The other patients, who all suffer from forms of sleep deprivation, commonly dream Rose's tale. When she suddenly awakes, they find their own reprieve lifted, and their maladies return. Everyone begins to search for a way to even the scales.

Sheinkin, who won the Tony for *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, deals with some very provocative themes here -- for example, how children tempt death, and how we rely on others to define and cure us rather than looking within ourselves for the answer.

The husband and wife team of Milburn and Vigoda, best known as part of the pop group Groovelily, has written a delightful score, one particularly influenced by country rock and the sounds of the 1970s. Their lyrics are crafty, and their songs charmingly melodic. The anthem "Trouble," sung by Rose and the Groundskeeper's son (also played by Harvard and voiced and sung by Milburn), states the recklessness of youth. Meanwhile, Rose and her modern beau, the orderly, sing "You Make Me Feel Awake," a ballad reminiscent of such Disney neo-classics as "A Whole New World" and "Beauty and the Beast." The pair also deftly play their own instruments on stage. (Vigoda is especially sexy on the electric violin.)

Bray and Amato work very well together, often to hilarious effect. During their villainous number "Uninvited," you forget that one woman is singing while the other is signing. Their most

delectable song, "The Wheel Goes Round," pretends to be an instruction for the spinning wheel but is really a recipe for murder, as the fairy seduces Rose to her death.

As the young lovers, Harvard and Wailes nicely embody youthful arrogance and innocent passion. Derricks-Carroll is the show's soul as the King, a man who has given away his livelihood to protect his daughter. The four sleep-deprived patients, who act as sort of a Greek chorus, also have great moments. Kevin Earley invokes the boy bands of the 1960s with the pastiche-like "Still Small Hours," while both Christia Manztke and Troy Kotsur (the latter voiced by drummer Shannon Ford) have impeccable comic timing.

Much of the credit for the show's success belongs to director Jeff Calhoun, who helmed Deaf West's hit revival of *Big River*. He clearly and repeatedly focuses on the show's major theme, the convergence of opposites. We hear it musically in "Can You Cure Me," which mixes rap and country music; and we see it in the set, such as when the high school boys' bathroom opens up to a colorful stained-glass scrim.

We see opposites everywhere: the sleeping and the wide awake, traditional instruments and modern instruments, the welcomed and the uninvited, the haves and the have nots, and, most clearly, deaf performers and hearing/speaking actors.

Despite Calhoun's skill as a choreographer, it's not surprising that *Sleeping Beauty Wakes* contains no real dancing, since the sign language acts as choreography. The performers are all very lyrical, and their movements never seem perfunctory. Indeed, they help create a world -- a most welcome one -- that is rarely seen in the theater.

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