

‘Shrek’ hits Coeur d’Alene stage with added depth

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“Shrek,” reviewed Thursday at the Coeur d’Alene Kroc Center and presented by Coeur d’Alene Summer Theatre, continues through Aug. 23. Call (208) 660-2958 for tickets.

Shrek is an ogre.

Then again, anyone who has paid attention for the past 25 years knows that. Based on a 1990 picture book by William Stieg, the animated version of “Shrek” was a box office smash in 2001, and won the first-ever Oscar for best animated feature. There have been three sequels, a spinoff and various holiday specials.

And a Broadway musical. The 2008 “Shrek: The Musical” has an impressive pedigree, with music by Jeanine Tesori, who this year won a Tony for her “Fun Home” score, and a book by David Lindsay-Abaire, a Pulitzer Prize winner for “Rabbit Hole.”

Now, the story of Shrek, Princess Fiona and the lovable talking Donkey are on stage at Coeur d’Alene Summer Theatre.

This production stars Erik Gratton as the not-so-jolly green giant. The musical deviates slightly from the movie, giving some back story for the nasty little Lord Farquaad, and telling us how Shrek came to live alone in his swamp as a child. Princess Fiona, played by Liz Shivener, has a similar tale of woe, giving an added dimension to their blossoming romance.

The rest of the story is pretty familiar. Farquaad forces all the fairy tale creatures out of the kingdom of Dulac and into Shrek’s swamp. Shrek, being all Greta Garbo, just wants to be alone. So he storms into Dulac, accompanied by a smartass talking donkey, and demands his swamp back. Farquaad, needing to marry a princess in order to be king, tells Shrek that if he will rescue Fiona, Farquaad will give him his swamp. Fiona, once rescued, is revealed to have her own secret, one that turns the fairy tale wedding on its head.

Gratton and Shivener are delightful as the leads. Gratton, with a toned-down version of Mike Myers’ outrageous Scottish burr from the movie, makes Shrek more loveable than scary (but still kinda gross). And Shivener, a veteran of the “Shrek” national tour, makes Fiona a full-bodied character, one who struggles to deal with the fact that her fairy tale ending will look very different than she imagined.

John Devereaux, last seen in Coeur d’Alene in 2012’s “Ragtime,” is a hoot as Donkey. Following the great vocal performance of Eddie Murphy from the films cannot be easy, but Devereaux makes the role his own. He’s having blast.

Also having a blast? Jadd Davis, CST’s artistic director, as the pint-size tyrant Lord Farquaad. He performs the role entirely on his knees, and he makes Farquaad really over the top and

ridiculous. At one point Thursday, Farquaad is exercising, and Davis is really playing it up – so much so that veteran actor Jerry Sciarrio could hardly get his lines out. It’s a hilarious performance.

The ensemble is strong across the board, with good voices and performances throughout. Local actor Cody Bray was clearly having fun vamping it up as the Big Bad Wolf, and it’s always nice to see Callie McKinney Cabe, even when she’s dressed like Humpty Dumpty. The signature tune “Freak Flag,” from Act II, is an energetic production number with a message of tolerance and acceptance.

Dragon, who guards Fiona and falls hard for Donkey, is an impressive sight. It takes five actors to make her move. Built by University High School for their production of “Shrek” a couple years ago, she’s a marvel to see.

“Shrek” is fun, has heart and successfully pokes fun at fairy tale conventions. The music is lively and upbeat, and there are enough farts and burps to keep the young boys in the audience in stitches. It does feel a song or two too long, but overall, “Shrek” in Coeur d’Alene makes for a fine summer evening.