

# Review: 'Jekyll & Hyde' stripped-down, powerfully

By CHRIS SILK (Contact) Originally published 6:01 p.m., Friday, March 6, 2009 Updated 2:08 p.m., Saturday, March 7, 2009 Naples Daily News

## Musical: "Jekyll & Hyde"

Mark Danni knows how to pick 'em — voices that is. TheatreZone's production of "Jekyll & Hyde" is a delicious exploration of stripped-down staging, carefully refined style and a cast with enough vocal power to pin the audience to their seats.

Robert Louis Stevenson's novella, "Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," was published in 1886. There have been dozens of stage and screen interpretations in the past 12 decades, including a national tour and immensely popular cast album in the early 1990s, but the Broadway version didn't drop until 1997, where the show ran for almost four years and 1,543 performances. David Hasselhoff was Broadway's final Jekyll and Hyde; his performance is available on YouTube.

Danni strips nearly everything not absolutely necessary to the plot away, leaving his production to resemble nothing so much as a gothic opera staged on a nearly bare stage, with a solitary bulb lighting the floor and a stylized fan turning, turning, turning overhead. The show captures perfectly the dark, elegant sensibility that underlies the novella's philosophical meditations on morality and the nature of evil.

There's power in style — and Danni gets that. His tiny stage seems a thousand yards wide as Victorian London blooms in all its gorgeously complicated, two-faced and murderous life. The relentless focus on the essentials allows the simplicity of the good-vs.-evil story and a pair of doomed romances to play out against the backdrop of lush, romantic tunes. The show is a compact, tightly wound package that explodes with feeling in all the right places while holding a microscope over others —

particularly the attention to detail paid in Kathleen Kolcz's lovely costumes and Philip Watson's evocative lighting.

Dawn Lebrecht shines as the breakout star of this production. Her turn as vulnerable prostitute Lucy is soulful, evocative and heart-rending. Lebrecht's voice belongs to a diva. The plaintive tones of ballad "A New Life" rolled across the stage like rays of moonlight skipping over a silver field at midnight — hopeful, longing and desperate — but ultimately fleeting.

Not to be outdone, veteran performer Jason Kraack brings the role of tortured and tormented Dr. Henry Jekyll (and of course, Edward Hyde) to life. There's not a spare gesture in Kraack's performance; he stands nearly still to deliver the operatic "I Need to Know" number, powering his throaty tenor to every corner of the auditorium. Later, he switches back and forth from Jekyll to Hyde at the flip of a wig for the towering "The Confrontation" number.

The supporting cast is excellent as well, including big-voiced Dan Bielinski (John Utterson). The ensemble's "Murder, Murder" number is particularly engaging — the pounding intensity of the music blends with Karen Molnar's deceptively simple choreography to capture the panic evident with news that a monstrous creature is loose on the streets. Speaking of Molnar, I'm not in love with her casting as Jekyll's fiancee, but her voice and fragile stage presence make it work.

You wouldn't think that what amounts to a tale of a mad scientist with split personality disorder would be so entertaining. It is. "Jekyll & Hyde" entertains on a sweeping, operatic level that transports the audience into the mind of a madman and beyond.

Don't we all have a little bit of that Jekyll & Hyde duality inside of us? E-mail me at [csilk@naplesnews.com](mailto:csilk@naplesnews.com).