



Theater review: Lloyd Webber keeps mask on



Andrew Kober and company in "Unmasked." COURTESY MATTHEW MURPHY FOR MURPHYMADE

Unmasked

Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber, co-written and devised with Richard Curtis

Through March 1

Paper Mill Playhouse
22 Brookside Drive, Millburn
Papermill.org, 973-376-4343

By GWEN OREL

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You'll definitely leave humming.

'Unmasked: the Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber' passes that benchmark of a good musical.

Unfortunately, the revue at Paper Mill does not pass the others.

It's a kind of "Behind the Music" that intersperses live renditions of Lloyd Webber's greatest hits, from such musicals as "Jesus Christ Superstar," "Evita," "Cats," "Sunset Boulevard" and "Phantom of the Opera," with narration by the composer himself.

Lloyd Webber is endearing, humble and funny. He talks about tunes originally composed for other shows, including a song for "The Little Mermaid" that became... "With One Look," from "Sunset Boulevard." It was too dark a tone for Disney, apparently. He charmingly recounts writing a song for the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, realizing that since he was asked so close to the time that someone must have dropped out. Because the song, "Amigos Para Siempre," was sung by Sarah Brightman and José Carreras, we watch the video of it... and see a medley of pictures of Lloyd Webber at different ages. But we don't know what to make of that.

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Because despite a release promising we would learn about his "quirky family and bohemian youth in London," we do not. Late in the show when he mentions that he's 71, a quick calculation puts him in his 20s when he became famous. I guess you have to read the 2018 autobiography, "Unmasked," for more.

Richard Curtis ("Notting Hill," "Love Actually") co-devised the production, which explains some of the sweetness, if not some bad film shots (feet walking on the street?).

The show's look is clean and simple, using moving stair units and lights (set and costumes by Alexander Dodge, lights by Ed McCarthy).

But, somewhat unusually for Paper Mill, the cast is not fabulous. Some of the flat notes and scoops are painful. The acting is also flat: they mostly indicate rather than inhabit the songs. It does not help that the show is too

long. While many of Lloyd Webber's songs do stand the test of time — some don't. Adding a long flashy cello riff on Paganini ("Variation 23") only made the show longer. The songs from "Love Never Dies" are a yawn.

And the "Cats" songs just do not work well. Did they ever? At least Lloyd Webber is funny about the colossal disaster of the 2019 movie.



Rema Webb in "Unmasked."

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But some of the performers shine. Alex Finke touches the heart with her pure, poignant "Another Suitcase in Another Hall," from "Evita." Andrew Kober brings understated comedy to whatever he touches, particularly to "Skimblehanks the Railway Cat." Rema Webb, who sings the Norma Desmond role in "Sunset Boulevard," nearly explodes with power and poise.

Could this go to Broadway? Sure — but not as it is.

Right now, "Unmasked" needs a makeover.