



Holiday Arts**Guide**

Grouches are 'Grinch' actor Gavin Lee's specialty



JORDAN BUSH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By Terry Byrne

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After a nearly a year on Broadway playing Squidward Tentacles in the musical “SpongeBob SquarePants,” Gavin Lee is shape-shifting into another famous curmudgeon.

On Nov. 28, Lee dons the furry green guise of the Grinch in “How the Grinch Stole Christmas! The Musical,” which plays the Boch Center Wang Theatre through Dec. 9.

ADVERTISING



“I finally took off the extra pair of legs I wore as Squidward, only to put on these gloves with tentacles, which are fabulous but keep falling off in rehearsal and make it really difficult to pick things up,” says Lee, who earned a Tony nomination for his performance as Squidward.

Lee steps into the role of the nasty Grinch from the Dr. Seuss children’s classic. In the story, the Grinch’s annoyance with the blissfully happy Whos in Whoville inspires him to steal all their Christmas presents, only to learn from a child the true meaning of the holiday. Dr. Seuss’s simple rhyming tale was adapted into a popular animated TV special in 1966, a movie version with Jim Carrey in 2000, and a new animated film now in theaters, with the voice of Benedict Cumberbatch as the Grinch. The musical version, written by Mel Marvin and Timothy Mason and first produced in 1994, has gone on to become a seasonal stage favorite on its own.

“What I love about this production,” says Lee, “is that it has maintained the beauty of Dr. Seuss’s book. A lot of the designs and the staging look like the original pages of the book, and that nostalgic element draws audiences in because it looks the way they remember it.”

Composer Marvin says that old-fashioned feel of “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” is deliberate.

“This show is often the first experience of the theater children have,” says Marvin. “Our goal was to create a musical that would appeal to both children and adults, the way the book does.”

Marvin’s writing partner, Mason, was a friend of Springfield native Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss), who personally selected Mason to write the lyrics.

“It was important to him that the musical not stray too far from the story, even as we added our own creative touches,” Marvin says. “It was enormous fun writing songs that illustrated the ingenious personalities of the Whos and the snarky aspect of the Grinch. We weren’t interested in psychologizing the Grinch to figure out why he was so mean. It was a delight to write songs for this scary, mean guy.”

Lee, who is originally from England, says he wasn’t familiar with the Grinch until he came to the United States, where his role as Bert in “Mary Poppins” on Broadway earned him a Tony nomination. “I knew ‘The Cat in the Hat,’ but the animated version of ‘The Grinch’ was not a part of the popular culture in England the way it is here.”

While navigating the costume was initially challenging, Lee says the role offers a lot of opportunities for an actor.

“I haven’t been told to copy this Grinch or that Grinch, just come up with my own mean stuff,” he says. “But I have been encouraged to ad lib at some points, depending on the audience’s responses. I’ve never been in a show that encouraged you to stray from the script, so that’s crazy and fun.”

Marvin says the music for the show is also mostly about fun.

“There are some wacky orchestrations to reflect the cartoony world of the story,” he says. “But the goal is always to communicate how much heart the story has. My favorite number is ‘One of a Kind,’ where the Grinch proclaims his credo: ‘There’s only one of me. I’m special, everyone else is nothing.’”

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But when the Grinch's transformation comes and his shriveled heart grows three sizes, the number is reprised, but this time, Marvin says, "we turn it on its head, and the Grinch says 'I hate being one of a kind, I want to be part of something bigger than just me.'"

Lee says he's struck by the similarities between Squidward and the Grinch.

"I hope I'm not making a career of playing the grumpy grouch driven crazy by his joyful neighbors," he says with a laugh. "But I love the way audiences connect with these outcasts. With the Grinch, the audience is with me. They tolerate my bad behavior and help me get out of my funk. They see the good inside, even before the Grinch does."

HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS! THE MUSICAL

At the Boch Center Wang Theatre, Nov. 28-Dec. 9. Tickets: \$25-\$145, 800-982-2787,

www.bochcenter.org

Terry Byrne can be reached at trbyrne@aol.com.