

That Pesky Plant Returns in a Vibrant ‘Little Shop’

By [ANITA GATES](#)

Published: June 15, 2008

Audrey doesn't want much from life. Poor, dear, blond, bosomy Audrey, with her nasal New York accent and her perpetual black eye courtesy of her sadistic boyfriend, just wants a little tract house like everybody else's in an ordinary development.



Gerry Goodstein

Jared Gertner and Jenny Fellner in “Little Shop of Horrors.”



Gerry Goodstein

The chorus, with Badia Farha, left, Montego Glover and Angela Grovey.



Gerry Goodstein

Jared Gertner as Seymour.

In the [Paper Mill Playhouse](#)'s delightful new production of "Little Shop of Horrors," Audrey (Jenny Fellner) sings about those dreams in "Somewhere That's Green," the show's signature ballad: "There's plastic on the furniture/To keep it neat and clean/In the Pine-Sol scented air/Somewhere that's green."

"Little Shop of Horrors" is many things. It started out as a low-budget 1960 [Roger Corman](#) horror movie, most notable because an unknown [Jack Nicholson](#) had a small part as a dental patient. In 1982 the songwriting team of Howard Ashman and [Alan Menken](#) turned it into a hit Off Broadway musical, which became a movie in 1986.

"Little Shop" is a life-makeover story that evolves into a Faustian morality tale. But a big part of the show's appeal is that no matter how imperfect your life may be, it's a paradise compared with what these characters wake up to every morning. So the more pathetic the lead characters seem, the more we can enjoy feeling superior to and sorry for them, and the Paper Mill production goes all the way in that respect.

Ms. Fellner plays it absolutely straight as Audrey, as pure-hearted as a [Judy Holliday](#) character and even more naïve. Jared Gertner is adorably comic as the musical's meek hero, Seymour, making his entrance with a pratfall and conveying gratitude for even the smallest kindness.

Seymour and Audrey work at Mushnik's Skid Row Florist, a drab little establishment where business is very, very bad. Audrey is a battered woman. Seymour has neither love life nor family ("If I had a mother, she'd be so happy," he says when things are looking up). Mr. Mushnik (Stephen Berger) took him in from a boys' home and, as Seymour recalls, "gave me a warm place to sleep — under the counter."

In Act I, Seymour happens upon a strange little plant, possibly a new species. He names it Audrey II, for the co-worker he secretly adores, and it attracts so much attention that business is suddenly booming. Soon Seymour is doing radio and television and a big photo shoot with Life. ("Little Shop" is set in its original time period, almost half a

century ago, when getting your picture on the cover of Life magazine was the best thing that could ever happen.)

Unfortunately, Audrey II rapidly grows to the size of a compact car and can continue to thrive only on a diet of fresh human blood. “Feed me,” it demands. And Seymour, despite his nice-guy tendencies, complies. No one minds much when Orin the vicious dentist (Asa Somers) bites the dust, but after that, things become more complicated. Mr. Somers isn’t as maniacally inspired as [Steve Martin](#) in the movie role, but that’s a tough act to follow.

“Little Shop of Horrors” is not one of the great stage musicals of all time, but it can be a joy when its numbers are performed with the right blend of professionalism and heart, as they are here, with Bruce W. Coyle’s musical direction and Vince Pesce’s choreography. In addition to the peppy title song, “Somewhere That’s Green,” “Dentist!” and “Suddenly Seymour” are standouts. And the company’s first big number, “Skid Row (Downtown),” is downright thrilling.

The Paper Mill has a real pro, Mark Waldrop, in the director’s chair. Doing 1950s nostalgia these days is a lot harder than it was a quarter-century ago, when there wasn’t a Fonzie imitator or a poodle skirt around every theatrical corner. Mr. Waldrop’s production wisely goes for period accuracy rather than camp.

Take the lively backup singers who comment on the action throughout the show and set its tongue-gently-in-cheek tone. Chiffon (Montego Glover), Crystal (Badia Farha) and Ronnette (Angela Grovey) wear suitable 1950s fashions that refer to the decade without shouting it. This makes all the characters less cartoonish, which is a good idea if you happen to have a giant talking plastic plant at the center of your story, one that looks about as real as the shark in “Jaws.”

Audrey II isn’t scary looking, but with Michael Latini’s puppetry and [Michael James Leslie](#)’s basso voice, it does have an amoral personality all its own.

“Little Shop of Horrors,” by Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, is at the Paper Mill Playhouse, Brookside Drive, Millburn, through July 6. Information: (973) 376-4343 or www.papermill.org.

The Star-Ledger

Just de-vine

Actor excels as plant manager of Paper Mill's 'Little Shop'

Tuesday, June 10, 2008

BY PETER FILICHIA

Star-Ledger Staff

NEW JERSEY STAGE

Like so many organizations, the Paper Mill Playhouse is going green.

Whether or not the Millburn theater is accomplishing this by reusing and recycling can only be answered by its office manager. On stage, though, there's plenty of green, thanks to the ever-growing carnivorous plant that's always been the centerpiece of "Little Shop of Horrors."

Director Mark Waldrop's excellent production should make Paper Mill even greener for the next five weeks, from all the cash that will pass through the box-office window.

"Little Shop" didn't start out green, but as a black-and-white, low-budget film that Roger Corman shot in a matter of days back in 1960. Seymour Krelborn, a young man as ungainly as his name, works in a florist shop, where he's constantly harassed by his boss, Mr. Mushnik. Seymour has a crush on fellow employee Audrey, and is so taken with her that he names the odd plant he's been cultivating after her. She, in turn, is thrilled with the honor.

Audrey shouldn't be. This plant is no shrinking violet.

Back in 1980, two unknowns -- wordsmith-director Howard Ashman and composer Alan Menken - set the tale to music and came up with a camp classic that ran more than five years off-Broadway. A 2003 Broadway edition was far less successful, for the little show got lost in the larger theater. Because Paper Mill is perilously close in size to the Broadway house where "Little Shop" flopped, artistic director Mark S. Hoebee took a risk in trying it.

But the show works wonderfully here. The revelation is Jared Gertner, who manages to let audiences see more into Seymour -- his low self-esteem, his vague embarrassment as his fortunes improve, and his subsequent agonies. The sweet-potato-shaped Gertner sings and acts with authority, and won't be upstaged by any plant, no matter how large it gets. Gertner may be young, but he sure shows he isn't green.

For more than a quarter-century, Audrey has been played as a boop-boop-be-doop cartoon. That is less true here of Jenny Fellner, who goes easy on the kewpie-doll qualities, and shows that a human being is more than just her vocal cords. Fellner's blond hair is not her only platinum quality.

As Mr. Mushnik, Stephen Berger adds some flavorful Yiddish inflections. Asa Somers is Orin Scrivello, D.D.S., and plays those initials as if they stand for Dastardly, Detestable and Sadistic. This woman-beating character, though, keeps "Little Shop" from being non-stop fun. Finding pleasure with this part of the show is increasingly difficult.

What's more, "Little Shop of Horrors" is guilty of inspiring too many musicals based on shlocky sources. There's been "Evil Dead," "The Brain from Planet X" and even a musical of "The Silence of the Lambs." Indeed, though "Little Shop" opened the floodgates to quite a bit of junk, it has something the others don't: genuine wit and a sassy score, which make it the best of its genre.



Little Shop of Horrors

VENUE

Paper Mill Playhouse

CAST

Stephen Berger, Darin DePaul, Badia Farha, Jenny Fellner, Jared Gertner, Montego Glover, Angela Grove, Stacey Harris, Michael Latini, Michael James Leslie, Asa Somers, Tally Sessions

MUSIC

Alan Menken

BOOK & LYRICS

Howard Ashman

DIRECTOR

Mark Waldrop

SETS

Ben Stanton

LIGHTING

Ben Stanton

COSTUMES

Mathew Hemesath

SOUND

Randy Hansen

WIGS & HAIR

Charles G. Lapointe

MUSIC DIRECTOR

Bruce W. Coyle

STAGE MANAGER

Vince Pesce

nytheatre.com review

Judith Jarosz · June 12, 2008

I am one of the few people I know who has never seen a production of the musical *Little Shop of Horrors* by composer Alan Menken and writer Howard Ashman. Based on the 1960 film directed by Roger Corman, this was a big hit off-Broadway in the 1980s, and is a popular choice at theatres around the world. I jumped at the chance to catch the show at the beautiful Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, New Jersey. I was not disappointed.

When a UFO crashes into Planet Earth (here done with marvelous kitschy stage effects) it brings with it an unusual plant that is found and nurtured by our leading man, the short, goofy looking Seymour, who works at the flower shop of the good-hearted, but financially challenged, Mr. Mushnik. Seymour has a serious crush on his co-worker, the lovely Audrey, who is in an abusive relationship with her seriously demented dentist boyfriend, Orin. The mysterious one-of-a-kind plant, which Seymour names Audrey II, proves to be a godsend for Mushnik's business, as it continues to grow (and boy, does it grow) and attract customers into the shop. But the plant turns out to have a mind of its own, along with a ghoulish need to be fed human blood! I won't tell you more, but the action that ensues is lively, funny, and a little gory in that old B movie horror film way.

Mark Waldrop has directed a tight show with a very talented cast. The impressive sets are not credited with a designer, although Ben Stanton is listed as the "set coordinator." The sound design by Randy Hansen, lighting design by Stanton, costume design by Mathew Hemesath, and wig and hair design by Charles G. Lapointe are all very creative and wonderfully appropriate to the piece. There is some great work done by choreographer Vince Pesce, and musical director Bruce W. Coyle, who also plays keyboard in the four-piece orchestra, which sounds larger than it is.

The top-notch cast (almost all of them have major Broadway credits) does fine work across the board. There is a vocal trio of street urchins, Chiffon, Crystal, and Ronnette (characters cleverly named after female doo-wop girl groups in the 1960s), who weave through the entire show and are vivaciously sung and danced by three dynamo performers, Montego Clover, Badia Farha, and Angela Grove. With their sassy choreography and tight harmonies, they are great fun to watch and listen to. As Seymour, Jared Gertner strikes just the right balance of humor and pathos with his character, and as his love interest Audrey, Jenny Fellner is delicate and sexy, with a big healthy voice. Stephen Berger as shop owner Mr. Mushnik and Asa Somers as the psycho dentist, Orin, both have a lot of fun with their characters. See how many roles you can spot the versatile Somers in, after the final exit of Orin.

And now, on to the real star of this show... that amazing plant. The puppet itself, in its many sizes, is a wonder to behold. Michael Latini (and later in the run, Paul McGinnis) keeps it real by masterfully manipulating the many moods of Audrey II. As the plant's voice we are treated to the vocal stylings of Michael James Leslie, who, according to his bio of many stage credits, played the voice of said foliage both on Broadway and in the national tour. Leslie has a rich deep bass baritone that matches the puppet in majesty.

The Paper Mill Playhouse is celebrating 70 years of producing quality, Broadway-caliber theatre. They have been in the news lately due to financial difficulties not unlike those faced by many artistic organizations in these trying times. I think it would be a crying shame to lose such an organization and I strongly encourage everyone to help by attending their season. The train ride out of NYC from Penn station was smooth and pleasant, as was the short walk from the train to the theatre. The town of Millburn has lots of shops and restaurants, and the theatre itself is a large spacious building with comfortable seats, handicap access, and hearing enhancement technology available. Based on my experience, I will definitely be returning.

Little Shop of Horrors: Ashman-Menken 1982 Smash

Faithfully Recreated on Paper Mill Stage

Little Shop of Horrors has been a smash hit since it burst unexpectedly onto the stage of Manhattan's tiny WPA Theatre in 1982. Following its limited run there, *Little Shop* transferred to the larger Orpheum Theatre on lower 2nd Avenue where it ran for over five years before closing in 1987 after 2,209 performances. Fast-paced and ghoulishly funny, and filled with delightful pastiche music (mostly reflecting the doo-wop and girl group rock and roll of the early 1960s), *Little Shop* is practically surefire entertainment.



Jenny Fellner and Jared Gertner

However, *Little Shop* is more than that. It is a seminal American musical. A true original which brought low brow culture (here a 1960 science fiction/horror film comedy of the same name directed by Roger Corman that was shot in two days at a cost of \$27,000) and post American Songbook musical styles to our musical theatre in the service of self-referential satiric comedy. Ashman, then WPA artistic director, believed that if he didn't have his own theatre, there would have been no producer who would have been willing to put on *Little Shop*. Its inferior spawn may often wreak the same havoc on musical theatre that Audrey II's off-shoots intend to inflict on human kind. However, it is also the progenitor of such superior musicals as *Batboy* and *Hairspray*. And, whatever one may think of its successors, *Little Shop* retains the exhilarating wit and fresh intelligence which made it so refreshing in the heady days when the youthful Howard Ashman (book, lyrics, and direction) and Alan Menken (music) first created it.

On stage, the scene is set by a trio of street urchins, played by three black female singers, each named after a popular girl group of the early sixties (Chiffon, Crystal and Ronnette). Schlemiel Seymour Krelborn, rescued from an orphanage by Mr. Mushnik, works in Mushnik's failing Skid Row flower shop. Seymour's flower shop co-worker is the tackily sexy and sweetly simple Audrey, who is a willing punching bag for her sadistic dentist boyfriend. Seymour adores Audrey, and both long for a better life in the suburbs ("Somewhere That's Green"). Seymour obtains a strange and interesting plant resembling a Venus Fly Trap that has fallen from outer space. Seymour names the plant Audrey II. Accidentally discovering that the plant thrives on human blood, Seymour provides it by cutting his fingers. When put on display, the plant attracts business to the shop and brings fame and success to Seymour. It isn't long before Audrey II grows to gargantuan proportions. The plant then unleashes a soul singer's voice, and demands flesh and more blood. Seymour at first recoils from this suggestion, but there is that sadistic dentist.

Director Mark Waldrop has chosen to recreate the original 1982 production in so far as reasonably possible. Jenny Fellner nicely captures the substandard eastern accent and lispy vocalization that made Ellen Greene oddly poignant as Audrey. Jared Gertner's Seymour is engaging, but a full realization of Seymour requires a more quirky, idiosyncratic display of neurotic need. There can be no reservation about the goosebumps raised by "Suddenly Seymour," Gertner's thrilling duet with Fellner. Listen to the subtle beauty of Menken's melody and the craft and the off-beat tenderness of Ashman's lyrics for these lovers from the uneducated, permanent underclass.

Stephen Berger captures the humorous Yiddishisms of the grumpy and manipulative Mushnik, an amusingly stereotypical role which, with the passing of an older generation, has become less common in our theatre. Asa Somers as Orin, the leathered jacketed, sadistic dentist, performs with a most entertaining, maniacal relish. Somers also performs several additional short roles with aplomb. Montego Glover (Chiffon), Badia Farha (Crystal) and Angela Grovey (Ronnette) create distinctive individuals and sing well. However, choreographer Vince Pesce should have provided more variety in their dance routines.

Of course, the big scene stealer is Audrey II. Michael James Leslie is powerful, witty and a fully secure belter as the plant's voice. Leslie's comic timing is right on. The original puppet design of Martin P. Robinson has been augmented by design and construction by Monkey Boy Productions. Audrey II does not extend beyond the stage (well, there is an entertaining added effect at the final curtain which need not be given away here). Still, it is impressively supple, and, serially, large, extremely large, enormous and enormously entertaining.

A successful recreation of a 26-year-old small theatre musical in a full sized proscenium theatre requires many new creative ideas and choices which must illuminate the vision of the original. The near perfect craftsmanship of *Little Shop of Horrors* is revealed by director Mark Waldrop. It is clear that he completely understands the intentions of writer-original director Howard Ashman as his Paper Mill production captures the nuances and depth that are the ballast of *Little Shop*. There is a sense of gravitas and true horror when, at the conclusion of the first act, Seymour feeds Orin's bloody body parts, one by one, into the maw of Audrey II. With the darkened but vivid lighting and keyboard organ sounds contributing to the feeling that evil was abroad on Skid Row, I was struck by how closely this *Little Shop* scene mirrored the texture of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* (Note: *Sweeney Todd* opened in New York in 1978).

More generally, there is a social consciousness and craftsmanship here that is all too rare in today's musical theatre. The second song, "Skid Row (Downtown)," describes the drudgery of menial work followed by the depression of returning to a poor, unlivable neighborhood. And, as Seymour loses his bearings and there is clearly no escape for anyone, an underlying sense of sadness and hopelessness for the have nots can be felt. The happiest, most brightly lit moment in this production is when we see Mushnik's Flower Shop flourishing, creating jobs and money for everyone in sight.

Little Shop of Horrors may be too intense for impressionable younger children. It is to the credit of Paper Mill and Waldrop that they have not softened its outré moments in order to broaden *Little Shop's* family appeal. The result is that New Jersey audiences (most especially including older children) are being presented with a *Little Shop of Horrors*, which continues the restoration of Paper Mill's luster as a major regional musical theatre.

Little Shop of Horrors continues performances through July 6 - Evenings: Wed., Thurs. & Sun. 7:30 pm; Fri. & Sat 8 pm / Matinees: Thurs, Sat. & Sun. 2 pm (no perf. 7/4; additional perf 7/1 at 7:30PM)- at the Paper Mill Playhouse, Brookside Drive, Millburn, NJ 07041. Box Office: 973-376-4343; online: www.papermill.org.

Little Shop of Horrors book and lyrics by Howard Ashman; Music by Alan Menken; directed by Mark Waldrop

Cast

Chiffon.....Montego Glover
Crystal.....Badia Farha
Ronnelle.....Angela Grovey
Mushnik.....Stephen Berger
Audrey.....Jenny Fellner
Seymour.....Jared Gertner
Orin, others.....Asa Somers
Skid Row Folk.....Darin DePaul/ Stacey Harris
.....Tally Sessions
Voice of Audrey II.....Michael James Leslie
Audrey II Manipulation.....Michael Latini
Manipulation (6/29-7/6).....Paul McGinnis

Photo: Gerry Goodstein

WHAT'S IN THE PLANT FOOD?

By BILL STEVENSON

A cool time will be had by all at this pleasant revival of *Little Shop of Horrors*: a bloodthirsty plant to scare the kids and songs to inspire Doo-Wop memories in the parents.

If our early heat wave has you feeling droopy, Paper Mill Playhouse's zippy production of *Little Shop of Horrors* just might give you a much-needed lift. The cast is winning, **Mark Waldrop's** direction is inventive, and the air-conditioning is as refreshing as **Howard Ashman** and **Alan Menken's** catchy tunes.

Ashman wrote the clever book and lyrics, while Menken composed the fifties-inspired music. The team also collaborated on Disney's animated blockbuster *Beauty and the Beast* before Ashman's death in 1991. *Little Shop* ran for years Off Broadway, and it's easy to see why. The retro songs are terrific, the broadly funny characters give actors plenty to work with, and there's even a singing, man-eating plant. What's not to like?

There's plenty to like in Waldrop's fast-paced Paper Mill staging. For one thing, the girl-group trio—a kind of Skid Row Greek Chorus—nearly steals the show. Choreographer **Vince Pesce** gives them nifty moves, and **Matthew Hemesath** outfits them in snazzy costumes. Most important, **Montego Glover** as Chiffon, **Badia Farha** as Crystal, and **Angela Grovey** as Ronnette sing divinely. The whole company makes the Act One anthem *Skid Row (Downtown)* sound as good as it ever did Off Broadway or on Broadway (in the solid but slightly overblown 2003 production that starred Kerry Butler and Hunter Foster).

Waldrop's young leads look the parts and show off terrific voices while always staying in character. **Jenny Fellner** plays Audrey, the platinum-blond cutie with the abusive boyfriend. She makes Audrey sweetly vulnerable but isn't afraid to cut loose vocally during her big songs (*Somewhere That's Green* and *Suddenly Seymour*). **Jared Gertner** is a convincingly nerdy Seymour, the flower-shop employee who discovers a *strange and interesting new plant*, which he names Audrey II. **Stephen Berger** does a rather unflattering take on Mushnik, the shop owner who adopts Seymour only after Audrey II turns into a moneymaker. And **Asa Somers** has fun as sadistic, leather jacket-wearing dentist Orin (dubbed *leader of the plaque* in one of Ashman's priceless lyrics), as well as a bunch of other characters.

Under Waldrop's tight direction, the smooth production flies by almost too quickly. **Paul Wonsek's** set shifts scenes efficiently and fills the Paper Mill's large stage. Due to a non-Broadway size budget, however, the show's final moment is a bit of a fizzle. To nitpick a bit more, the puppeteer's limbs are sometimes easy to make out once Audrey II becomes a giant man-trap. Also, the theater's amplification could be better—it shouldn't be hard to

hear such strong singers over a five-man orchestra. And lastly, why aren't there bios for Ashman and Menken in the program?

Nevertheless, kids and adults will get a kick out of Paper Mill's fun, breezy *Little Shop of Horrors*. Parents will leave humming the Doo Wop-inspired tunes, while kids will leave talking about the bloodthirsty plant. In other words, a cool time will be had by all.

WORRALL PUBLICATIONS

Audiences will salivate over delicious ‘Little Shop’

By Bea Smith Staff Writer

For a person who has an aversion to horror stories, this reviewer has admittedly found a cure with the Paper Mill production of the laugh- a- minute scary musical comedy, “Little Shop of Horrors.”

Imagine shuddering with fright and laughing and tapping one’s toes to the music at the same time. It is a most unusual, truly astonishing, feat. But that’s exactly what happened Sunday afternoon in Millburn among the members of the audience. Of course, in order to stage such a fantastically entertaining production, a theater must have all the right ingredients.

And leave it to the Paper Mill to provide these ingredients. Mark Waldrop has done a tremendously creative job of directing his characters, perfectly cast, drawing out their hidden comedic and musical talents in such an eye- popping show.

The story, itself, has much to offer in scary and comedy moments. It concerns a flower shop that is going downhill in the skid row section of New York. An employee, Seymour, has found an unusual plant that seems to have fallen on earth from outer space and, despite the objections of his employer, Mr. Mushnik, Seymour attempts to nourish it and watch it grow.

In fact, the droll, overweight, bespectacled Seymour, who is in love with his beautiful, shapely coworker, Audrey, has named the plant, Audrey II. However, Audrey has taken up with the most sadistic dentist in the world, Orin, who abuses her daily. The small plant can open up periodically, resembling the jaws of a crocodile, and occasionally will snap at the three singers, Chifton, Crystal and Ronnette, who introduce the musical with their hip hop rendition of the title song. This unusual shaped plant attracts customers, and Mr. Mushnik decides to keep it, allowing Seymour to take care of it.

Oddly enough, when Seymour cuts his finger on a flower and blood drips down into plant's jaws, it begins to grow. Now it's ready to absorb human blood. It keeps begging for more and, before long, Seymour has bandages on all of his fingers. The plant keeps growling and growing and begging Seymour to "Feed me! Feed me!" All he wants is fresh human blood. Before long, Audrey II is ready for a lot more.

The book and lyrics were written by Howard Ashman, with music by Alan Menke. The production was based on Roger Corman's 1960 science fiction comedy film. The play had its debut on off-Broadway and it has become the third longest-running and highest grossing production in off-Broadway history. It received many awards along the way.

The Paper Mill's mainstay production of "Little Shop of Horrors" should win its own awards. The cast couldn't be more perfect. It appears that Jared Gertner was born to play Seymour; he has all the elements and he manages to charm Audrey I, Audrey II, his boss, who adopts him, and the audience itself. Broadway's Jenny Fellner, as Audrey, is truly extraordinary. She has a lovely voice and her movements are delightful. Stephen Berger as Mr. Mushnik is wonderfully cast and equally delightful.

The trio, Montego Glover, Badia Farha and Angela Grovey, who are first exposed to the audience in worn-out jeans and end up in the second act, in beautiful gowns, are splendidly effective. Outstanding is Asa Somers, who is exceptional in a variety of roles, Orin, the dentist, who also plays Bernstein, Skip, Snik, Luce and everyone else, including a Skid Row derelict. The powerful voice of Audrey II is hilariously provided by Michael James Leslie. And the insane, exceptionally funny manipulation of Audrey II at Sunday's performance was hilariously provided by Michael Latini. From June 29 through July 6, it will be maneuvered by Paul McGinnis.

The miniature, five-man orchestra, directed by Bruce W. Coyle, appropriately provided the background for the catchy tunes, such as the title song and other memorable songs, including "Skid Row (Downtown)," "Grow For Me," "Somewhere That's Green," "Feed Me (Git It)," "Call Back in the Morning," "Suddenly, Seymour" and the finale, "Don't Feed the Plants."

The musical was marvelously choreographed by Vince Pesce. The scenic designs, realistic in its Skid Row fashion in the first act that turns beautiful in the second act, are provided by Paul Wonsek, with additional design by Adam Koch. Costumes are provided by Matthew Hemesath and the effective lighting was by Ben Stanton.

"Little Shop of Horrors" at the Paper Mill Playhouse is a must for every theater-goer of

every age. It is filled with more entertainment than one could wish for, many wonderful surprises, including one with audience participation, and a reason to realize that this Millburn theater has proved, in more ways than one, it is here to stay — permanently.



Carnivorous plant Audrey II complicates life for Jared Gertner in Paper Mill Playhouse's production of 'Little Shop of Horrors.'

Little Shop of Horrors

(Paper Mill Playhouse, Millburn, N.J.; 1,200 seats; \$92 top) A Paper Mill Playhouse presentation of a musical in two acts, with book and lyrics by Howard Ashman, music by Alan Menken. Directed by Mark Waldrop. Music direction, Bruce W. Coyle. Choreography, Vince Pesce.

Chiffon - Montego Glover
Crystal - Badia Farha
Ronnelle - Angela Grovey
Mushnik - Stephen Berger
Audrey - Jenny Fellner
Seymour - Jared Gertner
Orin, et al - Asa Somers
Voice of Audrey II - Michael James Leslie

By **ROBERT L. DANIELS**

That man-eating plant is back again, this time taking root on a Garden State stage. Despite its outrageously vulgar concept, "Little Shop of Horrors" remains an amusing satire. The Paper Mill Playhouse production of the 1982 tuner boasts the kind of tacky grandeur that once flourished in amusement park spook houses. The manic humor of the late Howard Ashman's book and lyrics and Alan Menken's flavorful, '60s-inflected pop score retain an infectious edge. An audience populated with teens ate it up on opening night, demonstrating the musical's appetizing durability.

Jenny Fellner defines perkiness as Audrey, the ditzzy blonde nursing a black eye and broken arm delivered by her abusive boyfriend (Asa Somers), while Jared Gertner is believable as nerdy

florist shop clerk Seymour, and Stephen Berger adds considerable bluster as store owner Mushnik.

Playing several roles, Somers is most amusing as sadistic dentist Orin, lasciviously dusting off the chair for his next victim while whistling an ominous and familiar melody from "Sweeney Todd."

Badia Farha, Angela Grovey and Montego Glover merge as a consistently pleasant trio, singing the doo-wop pop score and serving as a kind of blowzy Greek chorus modeled on girl groups like the Supremes, Ronettes and Shirelles.

The pivotal puppetry that commands the carnivorous plant has the audience eating out of its leaves. Michael James Leslie provides the booming voice of the ravenous shrub Audrey II, and puppeteer Michael Latini controls its yawning mouth.

Director Mark Waldrop has captured the musical's quirky appeal, making it quite palatable to those traditional musical theater patrons who had not yet discovered the piece's quirky rhythms and dark humor. Vince Pesce's choreography, notably of beggars and bums in the flower shop's skid row neighborhood, is agreeably animated, and the comic-book set design is appropriately gaudy. **With:** Darren DePaul, Stacey Harris, Tally Sessions.

Set, Paul Wonser; costumes, Matthew Hemesath; lighting, Ben Stanton; sound, Randy Hansen; original puppet design, Martin P. Robinson; puppeteer, Michael Latini; production stage manager, Brian Meister. Opened, reviewed June 8, 2008. Runs through July 6. Running time: 1 HOUR, 50 MIN.