



# Theater review: "Sunset Boulevard" is a delightful journey into delusion, denial and Hollywood tragedy

*By A.K. Whitney*

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Since it began, Hollywood has been a place of dreams and nightmares. Delusion, ambition, greed and grandiosity are always on the playbill, and for every success story, there are dozens of failures.

But what is even harder than failure is having great success and then losing it, whether to age or changing tastes and technologies, or -- in the case of Norma Desmond in "Sunset Boulevard" -- all three. How would you cope? With a turban, a devoted servant and a pet chimp?

Or by getting disastrously involved with a much younger partner?

Musical Theatre West closes its 60th season with a revival of Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1993 musical adaptation of Billy Wilder's 1950 film.

MTW's production opened last weekend, and director Larry Raben, musical director David Lamoureux, the cast and orchestra were definitely ready for their close-ups.

Unfortunately, the Carpenter Performing Arts Center's sound system was not, at least at the beginning of the Sunday matinee. By the second act, though, most of the amplification hiccups were gone.

Everyone, though, did his or her best to compensate for any technical difficulties, even if it messed a bit with the pacing.

"Sunset Boulevard" is a murder mystery of sorts, except we know the victim and method from the beginning. Joe Gillis (David Burnham), a handsome young aspiring screenwriter, is found floating in a pool, shot dead; he tells the story in flashbacks.

Gillis arrives in Tinseltown and, like so many hopefuls, has little luck. Then, while fleeing two repo men who want his car, he finds himself at a crumbling mansion on Sunset Boulevard. Joe thinks the place is abandoned, but it turns out it belongs to silent-screen legend Norma Desmond (Valerie Perri) and her dour manservant Max (Norman Large).

Desmond has not worked for decades, but remains convinced she is a star. For her return (don't call it a comeback!), she has written a screenplay for the biblical tale of Salome and John the Baptist, and she quickly employs Joe to help her edit it.

Appalled by the script and amused by the notion that Norma wants to play the teenage Salome, Joe takes the gig anyway, since he is broke and tired of living in squalor. And that's his first mistake.

Joe may be the narrator, but this show belongs to Norma. Much has been said about the dearth of great roles for women in Hollywood, especially older women, but Norma is a plum one.

Perri does the only thing one can do, and throws herself fully into the insanity, from the grand sweeping gestures to the manic facial tics.

Her vocal chops are impressive, especially on "With One Look" and "As If We Never Said Goodbye."

She has a wonderful rapport with the long-suffering and adoring Max. Large does "forbidding" like a champ, and has a powerful voice, which he uses perfectly on "The Greatest Star of All" and "New Ways to Dream."

When paired with characters like Norma and Max, Joe cannot help but seem bland. But Burnham gives his Joe just the right seedy edge, and his powerful rendition of "Sunset Boulevard" has just the right amount of desperation and resignation.

Ashley Fox Linton plays Betty, an assistant and aspiring writer who is engaged to Joe's friend Artie (Marc Ginsburg). If Joe pales in comparison with Norma and Max, then Betty -- the ingenue -- seems cloying compared to Joe. But that is not Linton's fault, and she does well with the pert role, especially in "Too Much in Love to Care."

Again, while there were issues with the sound system Sunday, other technical aspects of the show worked perfectly. One of the joys of this production is that it intersperses film with live action (and shots from the actual film), which gives it a grand feel. Lloyd Webber's sweeping score (can his work ever be described another way?), the gilded sets and the grand costumes do the rest.

"Sunset Boulevard" may be about the end of lives and loves and careers, but in Hollywood, at least, that end happens in style.

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