

Fear Factor

by Adrienne Cea

Wicked Tavern Tales reviewed October 20, 2007

Halloween is in the air, and in the spirit of the year's scariest holiday comes Greg Oliver Bodine's *Wicked Tavern Tales*, an adaptation of three terrifying Edgar Allan Poe stories. Bodine's adaptation keeps most of Poe's original work intact with only a few cuts and alterations to compress the tales into three short works that flow together well, with each one delivering its own special jolt of horror. The product of these edits is not a watered down text, but a celebration of all things spooky.



Wicked Tavern
Photo Credit:Amber Estes

Wicked Tavern Tales has a certain thrill ride quality about it; even the entrance to the theater resembles the inside of a creepy Disney ride. Walking through a dark curtain, audience members will find themselves standing in a long, dimly lit hallway guiding them towards two towering wooden doors. Outside these doors hangs an ominous sign reading, "Wicked Tavern."

There are many wonderful possibilities for establishing a haunted atmosphere when you have a century-old theater like Manhattan Theatre Source with which to work. The wooden floors are naturally creaky and the red brick walls legitimately worn by time. The candles and lanterns that illuminate Gregg Bellon's eerie, dark set do not take us into another time, but deeper into the one in which this room was actually built.

The chills are racing up your spine even before Narrator/Barmaid (Libby Collins) appears onstage to signal a start to the action. She answers the audience as if we have just asked a question, a question regarding our desire to hear a ghost story. Collins holds a lantern towards the crowd to light various faces and inquire as to how well they know their friends/neighbors/husbands/wives. She asks, because the characters in Poe's three short horror stories, *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, and *The Black Cat*, met their demise at the hands of those they trusted.

The *Tell-Tale Heart* is arguably one of Poe's greatest known works,

and the opportunity to see it performed live is a treat you won't find in a Halloween bag. Nancy Sirianni plays the crazed narrator, Ms. Moore, a woman driven mad by the evil-looking left eye of her charge, Old Man (Michael Patrick Collins). Sirianni captures every tick and nuance of the memorable character Poe constructed; she is pleasant and attentive to her employer and cheerfully frank about her justification for plotting his murder. When she hears his terrified beating heart the theatre flashes red and the sound grows louder and louder, drawing us all into her world of madness.

The *Cask of Amontillado* also focuses on a grisly act of murder, this time at the hands of a jealous, scorned lover named Montessor (Kevin Shinnick). This piece is hindered by some period-specific language integral to the story's foreshadowing that sometimes gets lost in the dialect. Fortunately, Shinnick and Ridley Parson, who plays Montessor's friend, Fortunado, appear to sense this hurdle and compensate for it with many hand gestures and exaggerated facial expressions to indicate when something sinister is afoot. As Montessor proceeds to commit his final act of violence, it becomes disturbingly clear where the story is headed.

The night of horror concludes with *The Black Cat*, a segment filled with so many gruesome acts that one can see why it was saved for last. There is no topping the maniacal unwinding of Alfred (Ridley Parson) who matter-of-factly narrates the story from his cell on death row.

With these elements of horror, *Wicked Tavern Tales* is fun enough to exist solely as a holiday fare, but the eloquence of Poe's language elevates it to something more. This play is not merely about shock value as the writing leaves you with thoughts and feelings to contemplate afterwards. However, you may want to hold off on such contemplation until after you have turned on all the lights.

Graphic Design: Daryl Boling
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Libby Collins as
 Barmaid/Narrator
 Michael Patrick Collins as
 Barkeep, Old Man, Asylum
 Warden, Inspector
 Brianna Hansen as Cecilia,
 Nurse
 Ridley Parson as
 Fortunado, Policeman,
 Guard
 Kevin G. Shinnick as
 Montessor, Police Man,
 Guard
 Nancy Sirianni as Ms.
 Moore