A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

Little Shop of Horrors
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: Timothy Casto as Mr. Mushnik in Little Shop of Horrors, 2003.
Little Shop of Horrors

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Synopsis: Little Shop of Horrors

The action opens on Mushnik’s Flower Shop, a failing store on Skid Row. The few plants in stock are, like their surroundings, run down and fading. There we meet Mr. Mushnik and his two employees, Audrey and the nerdish Seymour Krelborn who secretly has a crush on his beautiful but much-abused co-worker.

Audrey, attempting to help Mushnik bring more customers into his failing business, persuades him to look at one of the “exotic plants Seymour has been tinkering around with.” Mushnik is intrigued and allows Seymour to display his flytrap-looking plant, which he has named, in honor of his secret love, Audrey II.

Seymour and Crystal, Ronnette, and Chiffon (who provide musical accompaniment and commentary throughout the show) perform an upbeat number explaining that the strange flower was purchased from Chang’s Flower Shop. The plant appeared, “mysteriously,” after a total eclipse of the sun.

Of course the strange plant draws customers and business is soon booming. In celebration Mushnik invites Seymour and Audrey out on the town, but Audrey has a date with her boyfriend, the sadistic dentist, Orin Scrivello. Seymour also declines and stays behind to tend to the suddenly ailing Audrey II. That night, alone in the shop, he discovers the shocking secret to the plant’s health and phenomenal growth: human blood.

Seymour encourages the plant’s growth by pricking his fingertips and feeding Audrey II his own blood. This only lasts for a few days, however, and the meager drops of blood aren’t enough for the quickly growing plant. Finally, late one night the plant grows bold and speaks: “feed me.” Audrey II has now become a singing, dancing, jive talking, vampire vegetable!

Eventually, the plant demands more and more, and Orin becomes more and more abusive to Audrey; thus Seymour comes up with the natural solution. Murder Orin and feed him to Audrey II! He is spared the ghastly deed, however, when the nitrous-addicted dentist laughs himself to death on his own anesthetic gas. Seymour is left only with the task of dismembering the dentist and feeding him to Audrey II.

This, of course, also opens up interesting possibilities in Seymour’s love life. Following the disappearance of Orin, Seymour builds up the courage to tell Audrey of his true feelings for her. Audrey responds with the touching song, “Suddenly Seymour,” and the two are united.

Unfortunately, Mushnik witnessed Seymour’s crime and threatens to turn him into the police if he does not leave the country. The plant, however, must stay. Of course the solution for Seymour is once again right in front of him, and he tricks Mushnik into the jaws of the ever-hungry Audrey II. As the plant and the body count grow so does Seymour’s fame and fortune.

Ultimately, however, Seymour’s natural goodness begins to make him think about his lifestyle and what he must do to maintain it. At last, he decides to flee with Audrey to be married and plots to destroy Audrey II. Before Seymour can complete his plan, however, the plant mortally wounds Audrey. Dying, she requests that she be fed to the plant, so she can become a part of it and always be near Seymour. As the music swells, Seymour feeds her to Audrey II, which at last reveals its ultimate plans—nothing less than world domination. Seymour makes one last attempt to kill the plant but fails. In the end, he too is devoured. The singers, joined now by the faces of the dead characters, warn that Audrey II and other alien plants have begun to devour the world one city at a time—and we are left to scream with laughter!
Characters: *Little Shop of Horrors*

**Seymour Krelborn:** A menial laborer at Mushnik’s Flower Shop, Seymour Krelborn is the improbable hero of the story. Nebbish-like and insecure, he is naive and feels much put-upon. In spite of his flaws, he’s a sweet and well-meaning little man. Seymour is the owner of the carnivorous plant, Audrey II.

**Audrey:** The gum-snapping, bleached-blond secret love of Seymour’s life, Audrey works with Seymour at the flower shop. Lacking in education and self-esteem, she suffers from feelings of hopelessness at her situation in life, including her abusive relationship with her boyfriend, Orin Scrivello. Seymour names his plant after her.

**Mr. Mushnik:** Owner of Mushnik’s Flower Shop, a failing business on Skid Row, Mr. Mushnik is given to cursing in Yiddish. He is a man who seldom smiles and often yells.

**Orin Scrivello:** Audrey’s dentist boyfriend, Orin Scrivello is a motorcycle-riding black leather jacket-wearing tough-guy. He is tall, dark, handsome, and sadistic. His fondness for his own nitrous oxide proves to be his undoing.

**Audrey II:** A wise-cracking anthropomorphic cross between a Venus flytrap and an avocado with teeth, Audrey II is Seymour’s favorite and soon-famous plant. Seymour purchased the plant at Chang’s Flower Shop during a mysterious total eclipse of the sun; but once the plant has the taste of human blood there is no stopping it.

**Crystal, Ronette, and Chiffon:** Three female street urchins who function as participants in the action and as “doo-wop” chorus girls outside it, Crystal, Ronette, and Chiffon often sing directly to the audience in a hip, narrative style.

**Patrick Martin:** A sleazy opportunist, Patrick Martin tries to talk Seymour and Mr. Mushnik into leaf cuttings of Audrey II.

**Wino #1**

**Wino #2**

**Customer**

**Bernstein:** An uptown bigshot from NBC, Bernstein offers Seymour his own gardening show.

**Mrs. Luce:** The wife of the editor of *Life* magazine
Howard Ashman and Alan Menken
By Rachelle Hughes
From Insights, 2003

In 1979 the art director of the off-off Broadway WPA theatre, lyricist, and playwright Howard Ashman teamed up with budding composer Alan Menken, who was working as a commercial jingle writer and songwriter in local New York City clubs. The success of their first collaboration, the production of the musical God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, cemented the groundwork for musical collaborations that would span a decade and take them from off-Broadway to Disney animated films such as The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast.

Their first staggering success came from their work on the musical version of Roger Corman’s film Little Shop of Horrors. Written for the stage of the WPA Theatre, Little Shop of Horrors became the third longest running musical in off-Broadway history, as well as the highest grossing off-Broadway production in history. The musical won the 1982-1983 New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Musical. It continued to scoop up coveted awards such as the Drama Desk Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award and the London Evening Standard Award for Best Musical. The musical has been performed all over the world including productions in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Hungary, Spain, and Germany.

Menken and Ashman wrote two additional songs for the film version of Little Shop of Horrors and received their first Oscar nomination for best song for “Mean Green Mother from Outer Space.”

Their “horrorific” musical antics and ’60s do-bops snagged the attention of Disney, and Ashman and Menken’s creative talent was used for a string of Disney animated film blockbusters. The composer and the lyricist received two Academy Awards and two Golden Globe Awards for Best Song (“Beauty and the Beast” and “Under the Sea”) and four Grammy Awards. Ashman also served as the producer for Little Mermaid and the executive producer on Beauty and the Beast. He and Menken also received an Academy Award nomination for “Friend Like Me” from Aladdin. Unfortunately, Menken had to finish his work on Aladdin with another collaborator. Ashman died from complications due to AIDS during the making of Aladdin.

“In animation we have two guardian angels. One is Walt Disney, who continues to touch every frame of our movies. The other is Howard Ashman, who continues to touch every note of our movies,” said a spokesman from the Disney Corporation.

Ashman was a man of diverse talents and unending creativity. His lyrics have become catchphrases for two generations of music lovers. Born in Baltimore, Ashman received his education from Goddard College and Boston University and earned an M.F.A. from Indiana University. After moving to New York in 1974 he started his career in the writing world as an editor at Grosset & Dunlap. During this time he wrote plays on the side including, Cause Maggie’s Afraid of the Dark, The Confirmation, and, Dreamstuff, a musical version of the The Tempest. Ashman was the author, lyricist, and director of the Broadway production of Smile, for which he received a Tony nomination for best book.

Born on July 22, 1949 in New Rochelle, New York, Menken’s love of music was fostered by a family who loved Broadway musicals. His first efforts at composing began in high school where he studied piano and violin. He loved to play the piano, but he hated practicing. He says that when his mother left the room he would create his own versions of his practice songs. After graduating from New York University with a liberal arts degree he attended the Lehman Engel Musical Theatre workshop at BMI.

His musical accomplishments have garnered him numerous awards, especially his work with
Disney where he has teamed up with lyricists such as Stephen Schwartz, David Zippel and Tim Rice. He has composed the songs and scores for Hunchback of Notre Dame, Pocahontas (Best Song Oscar for “Colors of the Wind”), Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, and Hercules. His work in Aladdin received two Academy Awards, for best original score and best song (with Tim Rice) for that film’s “A Whole New World,” as well as four Grammy Awards. He is currently working on the summer 2004 Disney feature film, Home on the Range.

In 1983 the composer received the BMI Career Achievement Award for a body of work for the musical theatre, including his work for Little Shop of Horrors; God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater; Real Life Funnies; and Patch, Patch, Patch and contributions to several revues. The composer’s credits also include scores and music for several television features and films, including the purely orchestral score for the 1992 ABC miniseries, Lincoln, and music and lyrics for the Rocky V theme song, “The Measure of a Man,” recorded by Elton John. With lyricist Jack Feldman he wrote “My Christmas Tree” for Home Alone 2 and the songs for the musical Newsies. In 1994, Menken, along with Lynn Ahrens and Mike Ockrent, produced a stage musical based on the Charles Dickens classic A Christmas Carol. An instant hit at the Madison Square Garden’s Paramount Theatre, the show has become a perennial New York holiday event.

Menken and his wife Janis, a former professional ballet dancer, have two children.
Love, and a Desire To Be More Than We Are
By Don Leavitt
From Insights, 2003

What do Disney’s Beauty and the Beast and the cult-hit Little Shop of Horrors have in common? Well, they both involve monsters and unlikely romances. But the biggest similarity between the two is the creative team behind them. Both are the work of Alan Menken and the late Howard Ashman. According to Hollywood legend, Ashman was just eleven years old when he saw the original Little Shop of Horrors, a music-less B-movie by Roger Corman, made in 1960 for less than $30,000.

When Menken and Ashman began working together several years later, they turned Little Shop of Horrors into a musical and opened it off-Broadway at New York’s Orpheum Theatre. It has since won several awards, including the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Musical, and it’s now the third-longest running and highest grossing musical in off-Broadway history. In 1986, director Frank Oz turned the musical into a movie with a cast that included Rick Moranis and Steve Martin.

All three versions have now become cult classics because each, in its own way, has an innocent charm blended with a wicked sense of humor and an ageless story of basic human nature: unrequited love and a desire to be more than what we are.

At its heart, Little Shop of Horrors is a Greek moral tragedy in which a young and fallible hero seeks to improve his life by exploiting a higher power. In typical, Greek fashion, the angry Gods don’t just punish the hero, but extend their wrath to everyone he touches, including those he loves.

A trio of girls named Ronnette, Crystal, and Chiffon replaces the Greek Chorus in Little Shop of Horrors, and they sing in the style of the ’60s girl groups for which they’re named. Just like the Chorus in Greek tragedies, the trio serves as narrator and moves the action along through musical interludes meant to help the audience keep up with the story. In the beginning, they offer the audience a musical warning to avoid the dangers they are about to see, in the title song “Little Shop of Horrors.” And at the end, when everything has gone terribly wrong, the Chorus and the characters offer the audience a moral to the story, in the song, “Don’t Feed the Plants.”

The action takes place in a run-down flower shop in a run-down neighborhood, and the hero is Seymour Krelborn, an orphan living a life of indentured servitude to the shop owner who took him in. Seymour is innocent and insecure, a nerd who dreams of escaping and making something better of himself. Seymour is also secretly in love with his co-worker, Audrey, a pretty but dizzy blonde who dates bullies and no longer believes life can be better. Everyone seems down on their luck, until Seymour introduces them to the strange and wonderful plant he says he discovered one day during an eclipse of the sun.

They place the plant in the flower shop’s window, and things immediately improve. Soon the shop is full of customers, and Seymour becomes famous. Seymour cares for the plant and names it Audrey II, in honor of the girl for whom he still secretly pines. But he quickly discovers there’s a price to pay for his good fortune: the plant, he learns, has a taste for human blood.

At first, it’s a price Seymour willingly pays. In exchange for all that he wishes, Seymour offers the plant his own blood, and Audrey II begins to grow. However, the more it grows, the hungrier it gets, and soon Seymour realizes he doesn’t have enough blood to satisfy its hunger. Suddenly, Audrey II reveals it can talk, and Seymour learns it’s a man-eating plant. Audrey II strikes a bargain with Seymour, promising to give Seymour all he desires as long he continues to feed it.

The gentle-hearted Seymour is reluctant to hurt anyone, but then he sees Audrey with her abusive boyfriend and decides that this could be his chance to save her. Killing the boyfriend is easy
to justify, because it eliminates an obvious evil and opens the door for true love. But soon after, Audrey II’s hunger spirals out of control. One person after another becomes plant food, and although Seymour does indeed get everything he wants, he realizes his success will only continue with more killing. At last, Seymour decides he must kill Audrey II, only to discover the plant is now too big and too powerful for him to handle. In the end, Seymour himself is consumed by the curse that he’s created.

Like the gods in Greek tragedy, Audrey II views humanity as a pathetic race made powerless by their passions. Meanwhile, the humans innocently pursue their dreams but are unable to see the dangers of their actions before it’s too late. Ultimately, the hero is unable to handle the evil he unleashes, and, at the end, everyone is doomed to misery and death because of the hero’s folly. As the play ends, the Chorus in Little Shop of Horrors sings “Don’t Feed the Plants,” and the message to the human audience is to be careful what you wish for. As Seymour learns, there is a terrible price to pay when you get what you want, instead of what you earn.