Martin Grrrrrr

By Bob Mondello

Martin Guerre
By Alain Boublil, Claude-Michel Schonberg, and Stephen Caska
Directed by Ceydall Morrison
As the Kennedy Center Opera House to Jan. 16
Lion in the Streets
By Judith Thompson
Directed by Michele Biancino
At the District of Columbia Arts Center to Feb. 3

The trouble with washing garbage is that you can get it really clean—sparking, even—but it's still garbage.

The folks responsible for Martin Guerre, the much-revamped new Broadway musical at the Kennedy Center Opera House—so revamped that the revamping itself has become part of the show's set—are reportedly cleared up the place, streamlined the staging, tossed and is ended by the town when he won't beds his wife, Bertrand, abandoned broken and loyalty by his General Martin on the battlefield and then, like some post-Miss. Ripley, appropriates his friend's identity upon returning to civilian life. Bertrand ends up living like her un- friendly new husband better than she liked the one she was in love with—a twist that adds a little spice to the mix.

Both The Return of Martin Guerre, the 1983 French film version of this French legend, and, surprisingly, the 1993 Holly- wood remake that set the tie in the American South during the Civil War, kept the other principals and the audience in the dark as to whether the man who returned from the war was an imposter. The musical doesn't. It makes much of the notion that the real impostor in the story is the Catholic village that piously runs Martin out of town and then embraces his replacement. Villagers, also, don't make very distinct characterizations, and that's especially true of Artistic, which seems popu- larly admired by all; handsome young adults with nearly identical big voices.

Because the three leads share all those qualities (on the night after the premiere, I saw two understudies, but their program photos were interchangeable with those of the folks they replaced), a wondrous scene quickly infects the proceedings. When every tune is belted to the rafters (the title character manages this with his jaw dropped most of the time), they start to blend together after a while, no matter how pretty they are. It's not fair on first hearing to dismiss the songs as much of a movement, but although there are 33 indi- vidual titles listed in the program, I would almost swear they're all being sung to the same four melodies.

Part of the problem is Boublil's tendency to craft clear but predetermined bland lyrics of the sort that don't draw distinctions between characters. Put any of Martin's lines in Bertrand's mouth and they sound equally—at most—something that wouldn't work at all in, say, Gaynor's most recent show. Granted, Boublil must n't be asoulful as shrug about religion, superstition, and betrayal into his rhyme schemes, without having his 16th-century farmers sound as if they're gab- bing to a Noril (Coward) g -gunner very slightly somewhere, somewhere on stage could be a given a turn of phrase amid all the poetic platitudes.

For what it's worth, the performers give their all. Understudies Jodie Langan and Pierre Pierre Braun acquitted themselves quite nicely at the performance I saw as Bertrand and Arnaud, though they couldn't make much sense of the emotional wafting the characters must do all evening. Hugh Panaro came across as a stick with a great voice in the title role, that's largely because the authors made Martin's motivations impenetrable. The only performers to register strongly enough with the audience to bump up the applause at the curtain call were Michael Collins as the village idiot (his love for a scarecrow is a good deal more affecting than the central story) and Joe Lanza as Guillaume, a secondary character who later becomes the leading lady unrequitedly and (for reasons best known to the audience) consequently ends up murdering Perenances.

The show looks like a million bucks, but, given that producer Mackintosh

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