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'Capeman' Outdoors, Starring the City

By **BEN BRANTLEY**

Could it be that the Capeman — who for 12 long years has been wandering like a Flying Dutchman through the imaginations of many a New York theatergoer — has finally found his natural home? The title character from "The Capeman," [Paul Simon's](#) musical retelling of a street-gang murder from 1959, seemed anything but at home when he showed up on Broadway in 1998 in a big, stultifying musical that seemed both overdirected and directionless. You had seldom seen a man or a show look so damned uncomfortable, and uncomfortably damned.

Yet on Monday night, at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, the fictional reincarnation of Salvador Agrón, who as a teenager became immortalized in the tabloids as the knife-wielding Capeman, appeared to be utterly in his element. Make that elements. The rains were falling on the capacity crowd that had gathered for the last of three [Public Theater](#) concert performances of a no-frills "Capeman," which had a brief, brutal life of 68 performances as an [\\$11 million musical on Broadway](#).

Ticket holders huddled in dripping throngs under dripping trees for nearly an hour after the show was supposed to have started. Everyone was polite, but the tensions that arise when many New Yorkers are held in enforced close proximity could be sensed beneath the surface like a silent snarl.

This discomfort turned out to be a poetically appropriate prologue to what followed: a sung narration of New York history rendered as a myth that considers urban violence and spiritual transcendence. What about that curtain of rain that was still visible when we took our seats around 8:45? ("Maybe it's an effect," said one man down the row from me, squinting and looking hopeful.)

Hey, this is the show that repeatedly reminds us that "time is an ocean of endless tears." As for the preponderance of umbrellas and plastic ponchos that became de rigueur accessories for many in the audience, it's worth noting that umbrellas and capes become important

talismanic symbols in this show.

O.K., enough of the spiritual semiotics, although these visual correspondences between a show and its environment do feed into the appeal of this particular performance. "The Capeman," which features a book and lyrics by Mr. Simon and the poet [Derek Walcott](#), had registered as a calcified museum piece when it was staged at the mammoth Marquis Theater, with big sets and video projections that made the actors look like afterthoughts.

But in the park, as staged (and [radically streamlined](#)) by Diane Paulus ("Hair"), the show felt like an organic part of a New York tradition of tale-telling, of how accounts of tragic events in an overcrowded city are passed around and passed down until they become urban legends. As one of the characters in the musical, the mother of a murdered boy, says, "This city makes a cartoon of a crime."

In this case the final effect was more like a broadsheet ballad retracing violent events that once captured a public's ghoulish imagination, or a bloodstained blues-folk song like "Stagger Lee." As a story, "Capeman" — with its no-fault fatalism and archetypal characters — has both the strengths and limitations of that form.

Mr. Simon's score speaks in other and myriad musical tongues — salsa, doo-wop, ecclesiastic hymns — to express the colliding cultures that shaped, trapped and redeemed Salvador, who as an adolescent came to New York from rural Puerto Rico with his mother, Esmeralda. Creators of this version of "The Capeman" have referred to it as an oratorio. Most of the spoken dialogue has been jettisoned, as have several subplots, and there is a clearer focus on recurring musical motifs.

But oratorio brings to mind singers in robes behind music stands. And this "Capeman" rarely seemed to stop moving, unlike its Broadway predecessor. (Sergio Trujillo is the choreographer.) The story ran, undulated and salsa-stepped in a fairly straight line through Salvador's story of damnation and redemption in an intermissionless 90 minutes (as opposed to the two full acts with intermission it required on Broadway.) It has also been refocused to make Esmeralda (Nataschia Diaz) its emotional center.

Under the musical direction of Oscar Hernandez (who served the same function for the Broadway version), the score seemed truly to emanate from the city itself in a way it hadn't at the Marquis. The sirens from the streets, the barking dogs, the planes overhead: these all melded into a scrappy, percussive counterpoint to Mr. Simon's summoning of a city that is always an unexpected symphony of fractured calls and responses.

And when the young Salvador (Anthony Lee Medina, whose older self was played by the leading-man-handsome Ivan Hernandez) took his girl to “my hiding place in Central Park,” it seemed especially felicitous. So did his description of a city lighted by candles. And the interruption of that love scene by the young leader of the Vampires gang, which would open the door for Salvador’s fall into perdition, felt like a weave in the same fabric. New York is always part fairyland, part house of horrors. And a “satin summer night,” as Salvador sings, can be torn to shreds before you know it.

This is not the place to reassess the autonomous strengths and weaknesses of “The Capeman” as a work of art. In introductory remarks [Oskar Eustis](#), the Public Theater’s artistic director, called the production “a little workshop concert.” He stressed that what we would be seeing was “just a sketch, just a thought” of how it might be more fully reconceived.

Still, it’s hard to imagine this sustained folk ballad of a show ever having a more suitable and enriching context than that provided by one rainy Monday night in Central Park.