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PAT CRAIG: THEATER

Secret to 'Garden' is its strong acting

If you would rather weep your way through a Shirley Temple double bill than just about anything else, you must visit Concord's Willows Theatre for "The Secret Garden."

The musical will easily take you through an inch-high stack of Kleenex, as you revel in a world where the bad are very, very bad, the good are very, very good. And God only knows what will happen to poor little Mary Lennox (double-cast and played both by Hannah Rose Kornfeld and Katy Corbus), who was orphaned in India when her parents died in a cholera epidemic. To make matters worse, poor little Mary, who, was played beautifully by Kornfeld, is shipped off to England to live with her uncle, a hunchbacked widower, bitter over the loss of his beautiful wife, who died in childbirth, and grief-stricken by the seeming endless illness of his bedridden son.

See, you're already starting to get a little misty.

"Garden," based on the 1909 children's book by Frances Hodgson Burnett, became a musical in 1991 and won a slew of Tony Awards. It was quickly adopted as a theatrical nugget for fans of damp-eyed melodrama and musical comedy, who were equally taken by the Lucy Simon (sister of Carly) score. The piece includes "Lily's Eyes," and "How Could I Ever Know You." And there is the Tony-winning book by Marcia Norman.

So there's plenty of good stuff here, even for stoic sorts not given to public sniffles.

Uncle Archibald is played delightfully by Russ Lorenson, and eventually proves himself to be an old softy who was a mere victim of circumstance and the double-dealing of Dr. Neville Craven (Mark Farrell), who has his own secret agenda.

The pawn in all of this is young Colin (double-cast, played by Jacob Ben-Shmuel and Matthew Dragicevic), the poor invalid boy who is rescued by Mary; her maid, Martha (Kristin Stokes); and Martha's gardener brother, Dickon (Jeff Bryant).

"Garden" plays well with a fine cast and some outstanding voices who do well by the story. Adding to its impact is an astonishingly complex set, created by Peter Crompton. The massive structure, built on two turntables and featuring countless moving parts, is in almost constant motion, making the story seem to float across the stage, from Colin's sickroom and Uncle Archibald's office, to the fanciful magic garden (created by Colin's late mom, Lily, played by the powerful-voiced Elizabeth Hunter).

The garden is a stunning piece of work, with enormous roses carved into giant set pieces and a fanciful gate that reveals the misty oasis.

Director Andrew Holtz takes full advantage of the mobile, multilevel set, filling the stage with actors who are also in almost constant motion, giving the musical a dramatic sense of busyness and urgency.

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