



## Not So Secret

### Childhood classic becomes a musical that ain't nothing to sing about.

By Sam Hurwitt

February 28, 2007

Making a musical out of Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 novel *The Secret Garden* isn't a bad idea on the face of it. It's a charming, well-loved children's classic with an air of mystery and enchantment.

But turning a story about a young girl's discovery of her own private refuge into a musical that gives equal time to the grownups who should be remote and forbidding? That's a terrible idea, especially when most of the adults in question are dead at the time.

Yet that's exactly the tack taken in this 1991 adaptation by writer Marsha Norman and composer Lucy Simon (Carly's sister) that has now come to the Willows Theatre Company in Concord. Rather than the manor's secrets being revealed gradually as Mary unearths them, all its ghosts are on display, quite literally, from the very beginning. Everywhere she goes, Mistress Mary Lennox is followed around by the spirits of her parents, who died of cholera in India; her late aunt, whose favorite garden has been locked up and forgotten; and various officers of the British Raj, who may not even be dead. Between all the ghosts and the chorus of domestics and dancing tangles of ivy, lonely little Mary can't get a moment to herself. Instead of spending quality time with her, we often have to settle for people who don't even see her tsk-tsking about how she should have a pony.

Maybe it was written this way because carrying a Broadway musical is a lot to ask of a kid, although that doesn't stop people from staging *Annie* or *Oliver!* everywhere you turn. Alternating with Katy Corbus in the Willows production, seventh grader Hannah Rose Kornfeld has no trouble navigating Mary's relatively few songs, although her contrariness from the book often translates into inert stoicism on the stage.

Another problem with the narrative is Norman's need to make everyone sympathetic. Uncle Archibald Craven, feared and seldom seen in the novel, is revealed here as an old softie who is simply haunted by the omnipresent ghost of his wife. Dr. Craven is depicted in the book as a sinister cousin who wants the sickly heir to the manor to stay sick so that he can inherit the place. Here he's Uncle Archibald's weak and conflicted brother Neville, who convinces himself that what he does is for the best. The young invalid Colin Craven, who's always been an intolerable pill, comes off in the musical as maybe a little spoiled and stir-crazy, but a good egg overall.

The performances are hardly at fault. Russ Lorenson makes a noble Archibald, even if he doesn't carry himself at all like the hunchback people say he is. "Race You to the Top of the Morning," his bedtime-story song of heroes and dragons, is particularly touching, although it ends far too high as he becomes teary. Mark Farrell admirably brings out both the officiousness and inner conflict of Neville (regardless of whether that conflict is baseless balderdash to begin with). Elizabeth Hunter's soprano is appropriately haunting as dead Aunt Lily, and sixth grader Jacob Ben-Shmuel (rotating with Matthew Dragicevic) is adorable and funny as testy Colin, though he sings far off-key in his two songs.

Because everyone's so darn nice, the characters who are actually supposed to be rays of sunshine, such as maid Martha and her nature-boy brother Dickon, are simply irritating. Their broad Yorkshire accents aren't doing anyone any favors, particularly Jeff Bryant as Dickon, who comes off as an impish and incomprehensible hobbit, waving his walking staff and singing about the wonder of nature in that vague folk-pop that accompanied fantasy films in the '70s and '80s.

Simon's music for the most part is cloying and far too busy, and it's no coincidence that the songs that hold up the best are solo numbers without ghosts and townspeople singing several things at once. That's something that works beautifully if you're Stephen Sondheim and can actually pull it off, but here it's a mess, and it's not really the singers' fault. A rare ensemble exception is "It's a Maze," which has the virtue of being sung in traditional English folk rounds, and the amusing business of gardeners dancing with women in ivy-bush dresses doesn't exactly hurt.

Willows managing director Andrew F. Holtz has provided a lush and ambitious production, with an impressive rotating set by Peter Crompton that nicely contains the various rooms of the manor. The grounds, on the other hand, are depicted confusingly by chorus members carrying bits of wall, and the all-important garden isn't glimpsed until frustratingly late in the show, by which point it comes as an anticlimax. The end as a whole is awfully hurried and perfunctory after more than two and a half hours wasted to make all Burnett's mysteries as unmysterious as possible. As Depeche Mode used to sing, my *Secret Garden* is not so secret anymore.