



# ROSSMOOR NEWS

WALNUT CREEK, CALIFORNIA

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## **“The Secret Garden”**

*By Charles Jarrett*

*Willows brings back the classic “The Secret Garden”*

The “secret” is out and the Willows Theatre in the Willows Shopping Center in Concord wants everyone to know about it. “The Secret Garden,” a classic book by Frances Hodgson Burnett written in 1909, and revered by thousands of readers for decades, was transposed into a theatrical production for Broadway in 1991 starring Mandy Patinkin as Uncle Archie and Daisy Eagan as young Mary.

The Willows Theatre brings back this production that it produced a few years ago to resounding praise. With an almost entirely new cast, a totally new set, a fresh theatrical feel, this production is a great trip down a musical memory lane.

The story begins in the early 1900s in India, where young Mistress Mary Lennox discovers that her immediate family, friends, and servants have all died in a cholera epidemic. When the authorities discover that this nine-year-old girl is alive, they send her by steamer back to England to live with her uncle, Archibald Craven, in his 100-room mansion on the edge of the mysterious moors of Yorkshire, England.

Her recluse uncle has been in an extended state of mourning following the death of his wife Lilly during a premature childbirth initiated by a fall from her favorite apple tree 10 years earlier in her beloved garden. Lilly left behind her newborn son who was named Colin by his father. Colin, who has been bedridden with a mysterious illness most of his life, is attended to by his uncle, Dr Neville Craven (his father's younger brother), a head housekeeper by the name of Mrs. Medlock, and a vivacious and upbeat servant girl by the name of Martha.

When Mary (Kathy Corbus) arrives in the dark and foreboding atmosphere of the stately mansion, she is warned by Mrs. Medlock (Lucinda Hitchcock Cone) that her uncle Archie (Russ Lorenson) is unlikely to spend any time with her, and she is cautioned not to wander the hallways of the oppressive feeling home.

In Mary's unauthorized explorations, she discovers Colin, the lonely and sickly son who (unable to walk without leg braces) has been hidden away in another section of the

house, confined and treated as an incurable cripple.

Mary also discovers the gruff and sometimes ill-tempered family gardener, Ben Weatherstaff (Rick Williams); Martha's whimsical, nature-loving brother, Dickon (Jeff Bryant); and an enclosed, locked hidden garden. With Dickon's help, Mary finds a way to enter the walled-in garden and with the help of her new-found friends, sets out to restore the garden's previous splendor. When Archie's cynical and deceitful brother, Dr. Neville Craven (played well by Mark Farrell) learns of Mary's contempt for his disparaging and vindictive instructions, he attempts to send Mary away to a boarding school. He is determined that Colin is not to get well for his own ulterior motives.

Mary has to learn to deal with one difficult situation after another, but with her pluck and determination, life is about to be transformed.

While the music and story are as engaging as ever, the staging is a little overbearing and awkward. The counter-revolving, multi-faceted set works well, but displaces so much of the center stage, that it almost overpowers the feel of the production. It restricts other staging opportunities inherent in this production.

The music (a live, full 14-piece orchestra), the lyrics, and the wonderful voices, in particular, Elizabeth Hunter and Laura Pederson-Schultz, complement this production.

“The Secret Garden” plays through March 25. Tickets range between \$20 and \$38. The Willows Theater is at 1975 Diamond Boulevard in Concord (between REI Sporting Goods and Comp USA). Call 798-1300 for tickets or visit the Web-site at [www.willowstheatre.org](http://www.willowstheatre.org).

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