

SAN FRANCISCO

by Richard Connema

A Top Notch Production of *The Secret Garden*

The Willows Theatre Company has pulled out all the stops to present an exceptional production of Lucy Simon and Marsha Norman's *The Secret Garden*, based on the classic children's story by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Director Andrew F. Holtz has obtained some of the best musical theatre voices in the Bay Area and all of the singer/actors are bursting at the seams with talent. The sets by Peter Crompton are opulent and worthy of a Broadway production.

I first saw *The Secret Garden* at the St. James Theatre during the summer of 1991 with Mandy Patinkin playing Archibald Craven, Rebecca Luker as the ghost of his wife Lily, and Daisy Eagan as Mary Lennox. The production won the Tony Awards for Best Book of a Musical and Best Scenic Design, and young Daisy Eagan walked away with a Tony for Best Featured Actress. I thought it was an amiable musical full of ballads. There are no eleven o'clock numbers in this romantic, harmonious piece.



Russ Lorenson and Elizabeth Hunter

London finally saw *The Secret Garden* when Adrian Noble's Royal Shakespeare Company premiered it in 2001. There was a rethinking of the New York production: a far less busy set, a swifter opening sequence, and reordering and reworking of both the book and Lucy Simon's buoyant score. Andrew F. Holtz is presenting the London version to the audience at the Willows.

The Secret Garden opens in 1911 India where 10-year-old Mary Lennox (Hannah Rose Kornfeld, who alternates with Katy Corbus) awakens to find her parents have died of cholera. Within a matter of moments we discover that young Mary is sent to live with her uncle Archibald Craven (Russ Lorenson) at Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire. All of this proceeds with rapid speed, with the singing of a large chorus of ghosts that are referred to in the libretto as "dreamers." The wonderful chorus of singers also serves as a Greek chorus for the rest of the two-act musical. It takes a while for the production to get moving, and it's only when the crotchety gardener Ben Weatherstaff (Rick Williams) and Dickon (Jeff Bryant) come onto the scene that the play comes alive.

The Secret Garden's plot is somewhat like the novel in that Archibald is still grieving the loss of his wife Lily (Elizabeth Hunter) who died 10 years earlier in childbirth and who appears in this production as a ghost. Archibald is distressed over the condition of his bedridden son Colin (Jacob Ben-Shmuel, who alternates with Matthew Dragicevic), and the whole manor has that dark Victorian feel that you might expect to see in *Jane Eyre*. Mary discovers a secret garden that once belonged to Lily. Aided by her young maid Martha (Kristin Stokes), her spiritual brother Dickon and the crusty old gardener, Mary unlocks the secrets of the hidden garden. By nursing the garden back to life, Mary also restores life to her grieving uncle and his sick son.

The musical then moves away rather considerably from the original novel both in tone and text. There is an overly sentimental streak that runs throughout the play, especially on the part of those ghosts and Greek chorus who keep popping up. The novel's intricate religious and storybook symbolism is missing. In its place are boldly one-dimensional thematic treatments with Marsha Norman's forgettable lyrics. Very little is said of this secret garden until the better constructed second act, and even the last scene with the people of the manor seems very anticlimactic.

The fine singing voices and excellent choral work make up for the exceedingly sentimental book. Hannah Rose Kornfeld (*Alice* in *Alice in Wonderland* at Marin Shakes and *Simply Sondheim*) is a charming Mary. She avoids the cuteness of some child actors and she has a lovely and crystal clear singing voice in her duets. Russ Lorenson (*1776*, *Finian's Rainbow*, *Tribute of Tony Bennett*) turns in an intensely felt performance as the grieving Archibald. He has great vocal chops singing "Where in the World" and "A Bit of Earth."

Elizabeth Hunter (former Miss Minnesota, has been singing with orchestras throughout America) portrays Lily. She sings her songs with a tender soprano tone and amazing phrasing that distinguishes her wonderful versatile voice. Her duets with Lorenson in "A Girl In the Valley" and "How Could I Ever Know" are sublime. Mark Farrell (BATCC winner for *Noel & Gertie*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *Old Wicked Songs*) as Neville the calculating, mean-spirited younger brother of Archibald is highly effective. His duet with Lorenson in the show's most gorgeous song, "Lily's Eyes," is beautifully blended and reminds me of the famous duet in Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*.

Rick Williams (*1776*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Merry Widow*) gives a splendid performance as Ben Weatherstaff with a perfect Yorkshire accent and a commanding voice in "It's a Maze" and the reprise of "A Bit of Earth." Kristin Stokes (*John & Jen*, *The Learned Ladies of Park Avenue*, *Brooklyn Boy*) is delightful in the role of the maid Martha. Her voice and actions are much like Kristin Chenoweth.

Jeff Bryant (*1776*, *Roar of the Greasepaint*) as Dickon gives an unflinchingly wonderful performance with his exceptionally fine voice and merry countenance. He tackles the hard Yorkshire accent to good advantage, even when singing "Winter's on the Wing." Lucinda Hitchcock Cone (*The Night of the Hunter*, *Lettice & Lovage*) gives a sincere performance as the housekeeper Mrs. Medlock. Jacob Ben-Shmuel (sixth grader at Diablo View Middle School) is appealing as the sick Colin and does a very nice rendition of "Round-Shouldered Man"

Laura Pedersen-Schulz, Sebastian J. Romeo, Ron Picket, Steve Durflinger, Laura Benitez, Meghan Elizabeth Burke, Gary Foley, Blake Rosier, Andrew Sa and Julie Ponsford Holland as members of the large cast have marvelous singing voices in their choral work.

Peter Crompton's two tiered set is luxurious, with a turntable in the middle of the stage that changes quite a few times to show various sections of the manor. The last scene of the magic garden is lovely, with painted flowers covering the stage. Rob Anderson's lighting design is perfect and the costumes by Christine Crook are authentic Victorian garb. Director Andrew F. Holtz keeps the action moving smoothly.

The Secret Garden runs through March 25th at the Willows Theatre, 1975 Diamond Blvd, Concord. For tickets please call 925-798-1300 or visit the website at www.willowstheatre.org. Their next production is the side-splitting comedy *Dearly Beloved* by Jessie Hones, Nicholas Hope and Jamie Wooten, which opens on April 9th and runs through May 13th.

Photo: Judy Potter

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