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Review: The Secret Garden at the Yvonne

BY **DEBORAH HARRIS**

The Yvonne Arnaud's Youth Theatre hosted a five-star treat with this re-telling of Frances Hodgson's best loved children's novel of beauty, mystic and enchantment. Deborah Harris reviews a wonderful, heart warming musical



As a child, my next-door neighbour always brought me the most brilliant Christmas presents. One year, beneath a layer of tinsel and tissue paper, I was delighted to receive a red, leather-bound copy of The Secret Garden which is still one of my most treasured possessions. It was printed on thick, creamy paper with delightful illustrations. I was enchanted by the tale which is one of my all-time favourites.

The Secret Garden uncovers a tale of orphaned, spoilt girl, Mary Lennox, molly-cuddled by servants and sent to live at Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire, England with her uncle Mr Craven after her parents die of cholera in India. Mary is petulant and disagreeable when she arrives in England and gains the nickname, *"Mistress Mary Quite Contrary".* She is, in fact, taunted by the other children and very lonely. Through her passion for gardening and running wild on the Yorkshire moor, we see Mary blossom from brat to caring, polite child.

Tilly Bradley (Mary Lennox) makes a first-class, spirited Mary. She's at her very finest when she loses her temper letting out streaks of defiance. She also has a wonderful smile which lights up the stage, making

her a perfect fit for this role.

The book's charm lies in the adventures and discoveries found in the endless rooms of the sprawling Craven mansion, locked by her uncle Lord Archibald after the death of his wife and true love, Mrs Craven ten year's previously. There's a multitude of hushed secrets and ghosts of the past locked away in the many wings and rooms of the sleepy house.

Mary finds the key to the secret garden, locked after Mrs Craven tragically dies after falling off a branch of a tree. She takes a risk by stepping through the forbidden gates.

The set is portrayed with every-changing scenery which includes a labyrinth of corrugated iron to resemble garden doors, ladders and vintage cases opening up into garish flower garlands. High-energy, fast-paced changes resemble the ever-changing beauty of nature and our different seasons. Each member of the cast acted as a well-drilled team to hold up pieces of the ever changing scenery. Upon entry into the garden, the stage is magically flooded with bright lights, like eternal sunshine!



The mystical spiritual quality of the story is provided by the spirit of Mrs Craven who can be heard singing throughout the play, a kindly spirit. (I do hope that Kalyane Warren will continue with her singing with such an astounding voice and gentle manner).

In yet another twist to the story, Mary finds her cousin Collin (also very spoilt and masterly) confined to wheelchair. His disablement is cured as Mary gives him a piece of her mind and wheels him into the garden, forcing him to take his first steps and relearning how to walk.

The story is famous for the tale's motif's, the robin (Britain's best-loved garden bird). The robin in our tale spiritually guides Mary to find the old rusty key, and helps her to find the garden's door. To quote from the book, *"Nothing in the world is quite as adorably lovely as a robin when he shows off and they are nearly always doing it."* **Frances Hodgson Burnett**

This quote references the fact that our territorial robins (always first in the morning chorus) win mates by puffing up their red breasts (showing off!) and climbing to a higher perch. A special mention must go to the 4 children sporting red woollen scarfs, who creatively performed the robin puppetry - Will Haws (immaculate timing throughout!), Callum McClure, Ted Hayes and the wonderfully expressive Molly Frazer. Each of the children had a robin at the end of their fingertips which flitted from spot to spot in the garden.

The highlights of the performance included the harmony in the choral singing which retained an air of purity and simple clarity, providing an overwhelming feel-good factor as if miracles really happen. This was a wonderful show which I thoroughly recommend.

The Secret Garden is showing until August 2 to