

Whittier Daily News

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Theater review: At La Mirada, 'Matilda' teaches sound principles, has sound issues

The musical boasts fine performances, loses the lyrics amid acoustic problems.



Audrey Cymone (center) plays the title role in "Matilda, the Musical" at La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts through Nov. 17. (Photo by Jason Niedle)

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A child of abusive parents can go one way or another: living with self-loathing and cumbersome insecurity, or developing improbable strengths in the firm knowledge that what the parents are doing is wrong.

“Every new life is a miracle,” a group of parents sings at the top of “Matilda, the Musical.” Well, all except Matilda Wormwood’s parents. But the miracle here is that little Matilda can overcome, indeed soar above, the atrocious, hurtful, hateful parenting.

Roald Dahl’s 1988 children’s book has become this musical theater miracle, with book by Dennis Kelly, music and lyrics by Tim Minchin. The show began life in England in 2011, transferring to Broadway in 2013, and first reaching Southern California in a national tour in 2015.

Now it’s at La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts, where it receives a generous production, of the size and quality of the national tour, with direction by Michael Matthews, music direction by Jennifer Lin, choreography by Kate Dunn. It also suffers from the major issue that marred the tour.

The story features Dickensian characters, told with Dickensian twists. Matilda (Audrey Cymone) is born of a mother (Erica Hanrahan) obsessed with her hobby of ballroom dancing and a father (Josh Adamson) who refuses to accept that this second child is not a boy.

They ship Matilda off to a terrifying school, headed by the towering, tyrannical Miss Trunchbull (Michael A. Shepperd). Here the older students are bullies, but Matilda’s classmates begin to realize she is a leader and a protector. And, to better lead and protect, she develops superpowers.

Matilda’s teacher, Miss Honey (Nicole Santiago), recognizes the child’s deep intellectual and spiritual intelligence. So does the school librarian, Mrs. Phelps (Constance Jewell Lopez), sincerely enraptured by Matilda’s storytelling.

Over the course of the show, Matilda spins an episodic tale for Mrs. Phelps, about an Escapologist (Brandon Keith Rogers) and his wife, the Acrobat (Veronica Gutierrez). Of course they are idealized parents.

First and best, La Mirada’s production boasts eight tiny performers who bring Matilda’s classmates to musical-theater life. Dunn’s choreography doesn’t pander to their age, so they’re called upon to dance all out in complex, non-repetitive moves in patterns that don’t allow for error. And they make none, each young performer moving precisely, energetically, and in full embodiment of their characters, meanwhile staying in character.

Also first and best but additionally tallest, Shepperd gives a comedically chilling performance, broad yet subtle, as the iconically hate-filled, punitive Miss Trunchbull. A prosthetic chin changes the handsome Shepperd into this top-knotted caricature of cruelty, but even more potent are the icy glares Shepperd casts into the audience, each of us hoping no glance stays on us.

Notable among the secondary roles, Erik Hall delights as Matilda’s elder brother, the lethargic Michael Wormwood, in a stealthy performance, this Michael growing cheekier with each “bit” in the social commentary song “Telly.”

Also notable, Danil Chernyy plays Rudolpho, Mrs. Wormwood's ballroom partner, taking the exaggerated body gyrations and overly pouting facial expressions of the competitive ballroom dancer to hilarious extremes.

In Stephen Gifford's scenic design, the stage, and the characters, are surrounded by books, which reminds us that the story is indeed fictional but also that our lives can be and perhaps should be vastly improved by books.

Steven Young's atmospheric lighting makes the classroom look slightly chalky, the playground slightly oppressive and the Wormwood home definitely off-kilter.

Costumer Travis M. Grant and hair-wig-makeup designer Katie McCoy bring to life Quentin Blake's original illustrations for Dahl's book.

Kevin Williams' prop designs include an oversized 1980s mobile phone and an entire oversize chocolate cake that magically disappears as little Bruce (Aaron Tapia) is forced by Miss Trunchbull to eat it all.

But, lyrics are far too often indecipherable in this musical. They were indecipherable in the national tour, too. This could be the fault of the orchestrations, particularly in the wind section and/or in heavy use of the high hat.

It's definitely not the fault of the performers, though some — in particular Shepperd and Rogers — are clearer than others. Cymone certainly enunciates her little heart out, but Matilda is responsible for much of the storytelling here, and to have her lyrics overwhelmed by the orchestra means we lose much of this show.

We know, however, that Matilda rises above. Dahl ensures she stays a human role model by taking away her superpowers when she no longer needs them. And at the show's end, although we get no assurance that Matilda and Miss Honey will feel the joys of the childhoods they were denied, we leave the theater in hope.

Dany Margolies is a Los Angeles-based writer.

'Matilda, the Musical'

Rating: 3 stars

When: Through Nov. 17: 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays-Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays (additional performance 2 p.m. Friday, Nov. 15)

Where: La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts, 14900 La Mirada Blvd., La Mirada (ample free parking adjacent to the theater)

Tickets: \$15-\$89

Length: 2 hours and 45 minutes, including intermission

Suitability: Ages 8 and up (children under 3 will not be admitted into the theater)

Information: 562-944-9801 or 714-994-6310, www.lamiradatheatre.com