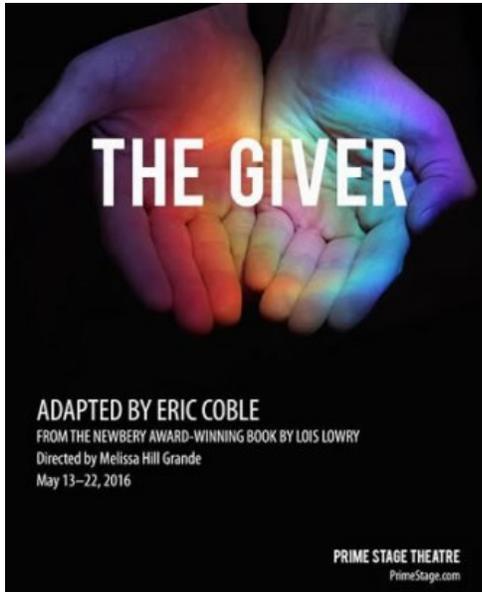




The Giver

MAY 17, 2016 ~ YVONNE HUDSON



Looking into a world where it never snows and no hills punctuate the landscape, Pittsburghers might be envious. However, it isn't long before *The Giver* at Prime Stage Theatre reveals the flaws in a community designed to relieve its citizens of the small and large bumps (and potholes) in life's road. Lois Lowry's 1993 young adult novel is the basis for Eric Coble's adaptation into a script, which runs two hours with one intermission as set in the New Hazlett Theater. *The Giver* takes a story from the page to the stage, as is the Prime Stage mission.

This book is often read in school, so *The Giver* is a natural choice for young people and many who experienced the book as students.

Director Melissa Hill Grande applies a thoughtful hand to the action on the Hazlett's thrust stage. These characters are confined by their perceived utopian world and an inability to venture from their regimented days and nights. Grande assigns movement that is functional and practical, like the "Community" where "Rules" dictate appropriate behavior and speech.

The Community is really a grey dystopian world never disrupted by color, rebels, seekers, or innovators. Here, parents may tell their sons and daughters they enjoy or admire them, not that love they love them. Rudeness is forbidden and reciprocal apologies and acceptances pepper conversations.

"Sameness" is required and everyone dresses in identical and comfortable grey jackets and pants, here designed by Kim Brown.



Jonas, portrayed by Will Sendera (right), and the Giver, played by Ken Lutz (left)

The central character Jonas is approaching age 12, the time at which each child in the Community is assigned their life's work by the Committee of Elders. His father is a Nurturer, caring

for infants and children, and his mother was selected to work in law and justices. Jonas's own gifts of perception and sensitivity are recognized by the Elders who assign him to the singular role of Receiver of Memories. He enters an apprenticeship with a man who has long captured and stored the memories of the world. It's a big job, but as the Community has no shared memories—or knowledge of history for that matter—the Receiver absorbs all that for everyone.

It's Jonas, portrayed by Will Sendera, and the Giver, played by Ken Lutz, who break the mold. Jonas is the recipient of all the happiness, sadness, enthusiasm, and pain to be stored. Ken Lutz is the play's empathic storyteller, also bringing humanity to the grey world.

Sendera brings warm and compassion to his character's world. As Jonas comes to understand human realities including war and starvation, Sendera's performance captures Jonas's frustrations, caring, and intelligence.

The ensemble of adults and young players aptly conveys the sterile aura of the Community. Families focus on raising children delivered by "birth mothers" and older folks go to live in the House of the Old where they receive daily care. Naomi Grodin as the Chief Elder and Gina Preciado both bring thoughtful dignity to their roles as they explain the life journey from being "assigned" to being "released".

Vanna Fredlana and Ricardo Vila-Roger are solid as the detached parents. On the surface, they aren't doing anything wrong, but they supervise their children coolly, providing structure more like programmed robots than caring parents. These actors' lovely voices and movements provide a deceptively soothing facade as Mom and Dad in the Community are raising kids with no grandparents in sight.

Other children give us a glimpse of childhood in the Community, but they leave much of it behind once "assigned". Sadie Primack is precocious little sister Lily who is quick to comment and question, but we know that will end with her childhood in a few years.



Grace Vensel (left) Will Sendera (right)

Grace Vensel as Fiona and Micah Primack as Jonas' friend bring youthful energy that contrasts with the regulated adults. But these kids play more by the rules than childish impulse, even knowing riding a bicycle before age nine is not permitted and that their

assignments are to be obeyed.

Balancing the greyness of the setting with his new visions, Jonas experiences through received memories is the major production challenge. Sound by Angela Baughman underscoring some moments and providing the necessary effects as Jonas' new memories are revealed. J.R. Shaw's precise lighting accents Jonas' dreams, visions, and forward thinking through the entire set.

One of the city's most capable and consistently inventive scenic designers, Johnmichael Bohach succeeds in creating a set that provides both sameness and enlightenment. Rectangles that are functional early on and also provide later splashes of color create a maze-like backwall. The set enables projections of light, words, numbers, and, well, shades of grey. Bohach's wonderfully accommodates the grey Community, details of nature and memories the Giver shares, and simple set pieces for daily routines and special ceremonies.

The set opens up to provide the Giver's residence and alcoves behind a later visible scrim. Unexpected alcoves showcase things the Community doesn't know it's missing—things of representative of music, art, beauty, convenience, and comfort—things we associate with home.

Prime Stage again, through its targeted mission, brings another significant book to life. With *The Giver*, audiences are encouraged to appreciate their own world. Utopia looks sweet from the outside, but the unpredictability of home may be underrated.

Prime Stage Theatre's *The Giver* runs at Prime Stage Theatre, on stage at the Hazlett Theater, Northside, through May 22. A sensory-friendly performance will be given on Sat., May 21. Details performances and tickets can be found at primestage.com.

*Photos courtesy of primestage.com