

Adventures Await in Fantasy World of Narnia

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The personal blog of western Pennsylvania journalist Dave Zuchowski.



Rachel Pfennigwerth (White Witch) and Eamonn McElfresh (Edmund)
Credit: Laura Slovesko

Four young siblings get more than they bargained for when they arrive at the sprawling mansion of a mysterious professor (Isaac Miller). As soon they enter the door, they're off on an adventure of a lifetime in a dramatic adaptation by Joseph Robinette of C.S. Lewis' popular 1950 novel, "The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe. "

With elements that remind me of "The Wizard of Oz," the "Harry Potter" series, "The Lord of the Rings" and, yes, even Mozart's fantasy opera "The Magic Flute," the work,

whether it be as literature, film or live theater, has an allure that draws in people of all ages.

Now getting a run at the New Hazlett Center for the Performing Arts on Pittsburgh's North Side, this production by Prime Stage Theatre is like a breath of fresh air with its enchanting world populated by talking animals, a majestic lion, a wicked witch and four bright and intelligent youthful actors - Peter (Jackson Conforti), Susan (Annabel Tew), Edmund (Eamonn McElfresh) and Lucy (Molly Frontz), listed here as characters in descending chronologic age.

Before you can utter the words "Open Sesame," Lucy, finding herself alone without her siblings, is amazed by and drawn to a massive wardrobe that stands off against a wall in a mostly vacant room. Curiosity gets the better of her and she opens the door, walks into the wardrobe and enters the troubled, frozen world of Narnia.

Unabashed, the youngest of the siblings soon encounters a talking fawn, Tumnus, played with warmth, sensitivity and gentleness by Andrew Neslett. A minion of the White Witch, the usurping ruler of the kingdom who causes a perpetual winter to pervade the land, the creature disobeys his ruler's orders to bring any humans he encounters to her when Lucy wins him over with her charming innocence. He eventually pays the price for "treason" when the witch turns him into stone.

Before long all four children enter the wardrobe, then begin roaming the land of Narnia, befriending a benign, welcoming couple who go by the names Mr. and Mrs. Beaver (Anthony Luisi and Caitlin Young respectively).

Things take a malevolent turn with the arrival of the wolf-ish (to paraphrase George Santos) Captain of the Queen's Secret Police, who bursts onto the scene with an explosive entrance.

Before long, the evil, kingdom-usurping queen enters the narrative with a regal, yet sinister air. Dressed in a dazzling, luminous silver gown, her hair symbolically silver to reinforce her icy demeanor, the Queen/Witch (Rachel Pfenningwerth) entrances the gullible Edmund with an offer of some sweet Turkish delight, jellied candy.

Pfenningwerth reminds me a bit of the witch in Disney's "Snow White," but she comes across as even more nefarious. Adding a bit of comic relief is her much put-upon attendant, a churlish dwarf (Matt Henderson), full of amusing antics.

The queen's main antagonist is a benevolent lion, (Michael Barnett) who quickly befriends the siblings. Clothed in a hirsute, shaggy mane, Barnett plays the Lion as a wise, though somewhat melancholic, almost mystical figure. Soon, sides are drawn and war between the two factions led by the Queen on the one hand and the Lion and the four children on the other, ensues.

Director Wayne Brinda's handling of the epic battle is cleverly creative with the assistance of fight director, Michael R. Petyak. Conforti's swordsmanship is fun to watch as the warring factions race across the stage in frantic pursuit of one another.

The prescient prophesy that so worried the Queen soon comes to pass and the forces of good eventually triumph as winter's chill is broken, flowers come to life and Narnia experiences spring once again.

The entire production comes across with a certain glowing enchantment. Even the wicked moments have a certain dark magnetism that come with the promise of better days. The set and props, while spare and sparse, are cleverly manipulated to evoke a sense of place.

The acting is solid and commendable, beginning with Frontz as the book's heroine, Tew as the sensible, even-tempered sister, up through Conforti as the unproven, though valiant, warrior and McElfresh as the vulnerable brother susceptible to the witch's temptations.

Whether you're 7 or 70, or anywhere in between, the production manages to capture the magical fantasy of C. S. Lewis' best-known opus. I can't think of a better way to welcome spring's warmth and rejuvenation of life than sitting through a performance of Prime Stage Theatre's latest production.

The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe is at the New Hazlett Performing Arts Center, 6 Allegheny Square, on Pittsburgh's North Side, through March 12. For tickets, phone 412-320-4610 or www.primestage.com.