

Theater in bloom



Blue Room Young Company in *The Secret Garden*.
PHOTO BY JOE HILSEE

Young cast delivers beautiful rendition of *The Secret Garden*

The Blue Room Young Company's production of *The Secret Garden* this past weekend was a perfect fit for spring. Last Friday (April

by
Carey Wilson

Review:
Blue Room Young Company's
The Secret Garden
Friday, April 5
Blue Room Theatre

5), the young actors—under the direction of Julia Rauter on a minimalist but beautifully painted set by Amber Miller—brought the story's varied cast of characters and its seasonal theme of rejuvenation and rebirth

to charming life.

Based on Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 novel, this stage version was adapted for young audiences by Pamela Sterling in 1991.

The Secret Garden tells the complex story of the life of spoiled orphan Mary Lennox, and her transformational time among the titular garden on the property of her wealthy widower uncle Archibald Craven's manor in northern England. Filled with melodrama and allegory, it's an uplifting tale of personal and spiritual discovery.

When introduced, Mary (played by Chloe Starkey) is under the tyrannical rule of the manor's chief housekeeper, Mrs. Medlock (Lola

Parks), a woman obsessed with orderliness and discipline, entirely unsuited to the care of young children. Soon Mary meets the antithesis of Mrs. Medlock, the servant girl Martha (Sophia Fadale). Despite Mary's initial imperious rudeness, Martha treats her with compassion and genuine friendliness, and encourages her to explore the manor's vast gardens, and she soon enough finds her way into the late Mrs. Craven's private refuge.

Given that the book has nearly limitless settings in the vast landscape of the Yorkshire moors—acres of formal gardens and the huge interior of the manor house—one might be forgiven for thinking this story would be impossible to convey on a black box theater stage, especially one as cozy as that in the Blue Room. But theater is about the people within the setting, and the emotions within those people, and in this production the young actors succeeded admirably. The wonders of the imagined garden are beautifully conveyed by a combination of Joe Hilsee's sound design and musical choices, and Eva Hilsee's skillful manipulation of lighting effects.

The casting choices may have been limited by the number of kids auditioning, but I found it interesting that two of the most prominent

male roles went to female actors, without the script being altered to suit the gender of the character being played. The heartbroken head of the manor Archibald Craven was played by Phoebe Parks. And Dickon, a sort of nature mystic, is played by Lila Chavira. Along with his sister, Martha, Dickon guides Mary out of her isolation and alienation by demonstrating that compassion and friendliness are attainable and worthwhile qualities achieved through humility, patience, attentiveness and hard work. As Mary discovers and cultivates her own sense of connection to others, she and Dickon endeavor to pull her isolated and frightened cousin, Craven's neglected son Colin (an excellent Ronin Heal), from his confinement in bed and into his mother's secret garden.

With its exploration of the sources of human sorrow, alienation, family dysfunction, class divisions and the healing power that comes from working harmoniously with natural forces, *The Secret Garden* is a story well-suited to any time and place. As this production worked slowly toward its predictable and welcome happy ending, the Blue Room proved that a vast and multifaceted story can be cultivated and blossom even on a tiny stage. □



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