

Not just kids' stuff

Matilda is a song-and-dance tour de force

In most reviews of musical theater productions, the choreography is mentioned only at the end. That won't do with California Regional Theatre's staging of the Broadway hit *Matilda*. Its dancing deserves to be noticed right away. It's spectacular, the most dazzling element of a production that is full of dazzle.

There are 17 musical numbers in *Matilda*, each accompanied by an elaborate dance routine. The leads are performed quite nicely by adults, but otherwise the dancing is done by the many children in the 25-member cast. Together they're as good as some professional groups I've seen.

Choreographer Sarah Shoemaker, working with director Bob Maness, assistant director Mindy Foutz and music director Olivia Cerullo, has created some of the most delightfully complex—and acrobatic—set pieces I've seen staged locally.

by
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Review: California Regional Theatre presents *Matilda* Friday & Saturday, 7:30 p.m. and Saturday & Sunday, 2 p.m., through July 7. Tickets: \$20-\$30

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child in a world where the adults frequently are mean and hostile.

Matilda the Musical (its original title) differs from the book in fundamental ways. Most important, it unspools its story primarily through music and dance, rather than dialogue. What dialogue there is comes mainly from Matilda. She's played by Charlie Sue Anson, who is only 9 years old but handles her huge role—many dozens of lines, numerous songs—with conviction and aplomb. There is nothing tentative about her performance. Her Matilda may be young, but she's smart and tough, and that comes across.

Matilda has to be tough, because she's sur-



Nine-year-old Charlie Sue Anson plays the irrepressible Matilda.
PHOTO BY JENNIFER REDEKER

rounded by unkind people, beginning with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood, who are played by Brandon Kuiper-Morgan and Kaila Davidson. Both give remarkable performances, incorporating a range of movements and gestures that enrich their characterizations. The creativity just keeps on coming.

Among the other notable performances are those of Linda Burchett as the villainous headmistress, Miss Trunchbull; Marquita Goodman as Mrs. Phelps, the kindly librarian who encourages Matilda's love of books; and Ruby Ocampo as Miss Honey, the lovable school teacher who tries to protect Matilda from Miss Trunchbull.

There is such depth to this cast that even the second-tier performers stand out. A good example is Luciano Castaldo, who plays Rudolpho. It's a minor role, but it involves a lot of dancing, and Castaldo is gifted in that regard. When he's on he dominates the stage.

As mentioned, there are 17 musical numbers in *Matilda*, with music and lyrics by Tim Minchin. These range from duets to huge production numbers, and here they're given wonderful treatments. For every excellent dancer in this production, there's an equally talented singer.

Matilda originally was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and opened in the West End of London in 2011. Its American debut was in 2013 at the Shubert Theatre on Broadway. Reviews have been almost universally positive.

Writing in *The New York Times*, theater critic Ben Brantley called *Matilda* "an exhilarating tale of empowerment, as told from the perspective of the most powerless group of all. I mean little children. ... *Matilda* captures the particular dread that runs like an icy rivulet through even the happiest of childhoods." □



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