

The Vermont Standard

The sheer, glorious wonder of *Matilda The Musical*

By Sharon Groblicki

Standard Correspondent

I was expecting to love *Matilda*. My two major passions, theatrically speaking, are a.) musicals and b.) singing and dancing children. I was not, however, expecting the sheer, glorious wonder that Northern Stage's production of this "satisfying and subversive" (New York Times) musical truly is.

The wonderful thing about *Matilda The Musical* is that it has remained true to the original Roald Dahl book. No attempt has been made to make it cute or charming. It remains dark and therein lies the excitement of the piece. We love the story because there is a Matilda in each of us, and we delight in vicariously confronting the darkness and the homage to mediocrity that surrounds us.

Matilda is the unwanted child of an unworthy family. Her mum is not happy to take time from her life as a competitive ballroom dancer to be fat or to give birth, as is hilariously portrayed in the first scene. Dad, a used car salesman, wants a son. He already has one and he is very happy with his television-stunted son and can't fathom a different product. Both parents are icons of middle class complacency.

Matilda, however to her parents' perfect chagrin, is not attuned to the family's model. She turns out to be an amazing child with a creative spirit, an inquisitive mind and extraordinary intelligence. She completely flummoxes her father who tries without success to keep books out of her reach.

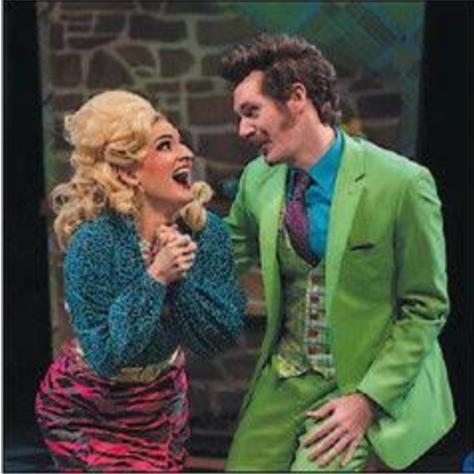
"Another flaming book? What's wrong with the telly?"

Roald Dahl is famous for creating perfectly horrid adults, particularly parents, but with recognizable flaws that we might see in adults we know. Mr. Wormwood (artfully played by Matthew Patrick Quinn) means well, but he falls short. His limitations as a parent and his impossible standard make him a perfect foil for Miranda's quick mind. He keeps calling her "Boy," because that is a product he knows and she keeps her mantra "I'm a girl" throughout the script. There is no animosity, simply a need to survive when she mixes a chemical to dye his hair green or to glue his hat to his head.

Mrs. Wormwood is not a mother who understands her amazing daughter. Her values are "looks, not books" and a five-year-old daughter, who has read all the classics including *War and Peace* in the original Russian, challenges her sensibilities.

Lisa Karlin delivers an over-the-top performance in this role. She is an amazing dancer and comedian, and we don't hate her. She is not a villain. She simply doesn't get it.

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Mrs. Wormwood (Lisa Karlin) excitedly listens to Mr. Wormwood's (Matthew Patrick Quinn) plan to get rich by selling used cars for new. Kata Sasvari Photo

When we first meet Matilda (professionally and ably portrayed by Kylie Benoit this night), we don't understand why these parents haven't wounded her beyond belief. We realize that there is a spirit inside this girl that takes us to a place of joy within our souls. Kylie as Matilda absolutely has this. Hers is a Broadway worthy performance (As does, I am sure, her alternate Bebhinn Knudsen).



Matilda (Bebhinn Knudsen) hugs her teacher Miss Honey (Alexis Sims) when Miss Honey offers to bring in more advanced books for Matilda to read. Kata Sasvari Photo

Matilda's parents, uncertain of how to deal with this changeling who has been put into their household, send her to school at the ghastly Cruncheon Hall, where the grotesque Miss Trunchbull (played with evil gusto by a masterly Tom Ford) reigns. She is the

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teacher you remember with deep-rooted animosity, only a hundred times worse. To her, students are maggots to be endured and dealt with. Fortunately for Matilda, her teacher turns out to be Miss Honey, every child's dream, (astutely and charmingly played by Alexis Sims) who becomes a mentor and an ally.

When a classmate, Bruce, (played this night by a talented Alex Hoyt) is given an inhumane punishment, Matilda stages a little revolution and the students change from a bunch of disheartened lackeys to empowered rebels.

Local children play the students (and area teens as big kids and parents), but their singing, dancing and acting would be remarkable even if we saw them on Broadway. Their British accents are impeccable and their singing is bright and stunning. The choreography by Natalie Malotke is intricate and artful and these kids dance it with precision and energy beyond belief.



The students revolting against Miss Trunchbull in "Revolting Children." Kata Sasvari Photo

In a show with nothing but strong points, the choreography is one of its strongest. Also to be credited is Kyle Brand, Assistant Choreographer and dance captain, because he has not only rehearsed these children and teens to perfection, but his performance and his dancing in the role of Rudolpho, the mum's dance partner is one of those cameos that steals the show.

A subplot involves the story of the acrobat and the escapologist that Matilda makes up to the sheer delight of Mrs. Phelps, the librarian, (played charmingly and delightfully by Danielle Cohen), is a showcase for the talents of Scenic Designer David L. Arsenault, Lighting Designer Dan Kotlowitz and Animator Andrea Love. The technical aspects of this show are award worthy, including the costumes by Aaron Patrick DeClerk.

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Librarian Mrs. Phelps (Danielle Cohen) listens to Matilda's (Bebhinn Knudsen) story about the Acrobat (Dallyn Brunck) and the Escapologist (Nkrumah Gatling).
Kata Sasvari Photo

Director Eric Love has produced a masterpiece. Yes, he had a great vehicle with book by Dennis Kelly and Music and Lyrics by Tim Minchin as well as a talented and masterful Music Director Kevin White, but his overall vision and his staging and the performances he gets from his actors have brought us a delightful theater masterpiece. No one wants to miss this one.