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'Secret Garden' is a perfect springtime show

The gorgeous set is first thing you notice about "The Secret Garden," now playing at Harwich Junior Theatre. Jeff Gardiner's multilevel set design is lush, extensive and proves to be incredibly efficient in allowing the actors to move from scene to scene, both indoors and outside. And this is before the musical even begins, and before you learn of the magic to come when the "secret" garden is revealed.

Then the lights dim and a thunderstorm begins, thanks to J Hagenbuckle's sound design and Greg Hamm's design and a very effective musical score. Suddenly the audience is transported straight to the moors of England along with orphan Mary Lennox, and that is just what the best theater experiences do. Under Nina Schuessler's deft direction, every aspect of this show simply shines. It is memorable in every way.

Some of the credit has to go Susan Kosoff who wrote the book and lyrics and to Jane Staab who wrote the music. This new version of "The Secret Garden" is true to the original novel written by Frances Hodgson Burnett in the early 1900s, and yet also works well for a modern audience. The show never drags and the songs carry forth the story in a way that is never extraneous. There is also plenty of humor in the dialogue.

As Mary, Christine Norton is defiant, scared and lonely when she opens with the song "No, I Don't Like It." Norton's face is closed and unhappy, perfectly in keeping with the emotions of her character at that point in her life.

One of the wonders of this production is watching the transformation this young actress is capable of making on stage. It's hard to imagine a better choice for the role of Mary. As she makes friends with gardener Ben Weatherstaff and a little fat robin red-breast, her face just glows and she sings in a sweet clear voice that resonates.

Mary's first friend in the lonely and strange Craven home is Martha Sowerby, played with wit and sauciness by the luminous Madison Mayer. Mayer and Norton have some wonderful moments of sweet harmony, both in their singing and obvious connection with each other on stage. Thanks to Joanne Callum Powers' choreography, they also move together as graceful as ballerinas across the stage. It's hard to believe they are both still in middle school, because their performances are incredibly professional.

Eleven-year-old John Reilly Burgess also impresses in his first role on stage as Master Colin Craven. Anyone familiar with the story knows that Colin is a tyrant who orders the staff around like puppets during his father's frequent absences. He is physically and emotionally crippled, mostly because he has never known love or attention. Burgess manages to make Colin lovable even during his tantrums, which is a tricky thing to pull off.

Equity actor Jane Staab, who also wrote the amazing score, is wonderful as Mrs. Medlock, and Lou Maloof provides many moments of humor as the gardener Weatherstaff. Wil Mosher is entirely believable as Dickon, the boy who can charm wild animals, and also Mary and Colin, who are wild animals of the human kind.

Ari Lew has a small, but very effective part as Archibald Craven, the man who grieves so much for his wife that he can only stand the sight of his son's face in sleep.

"The Secret Garden" is a magical story of the transforming power of friendship and nature. In the hands of talented people like those at Harwich Junior Theatre, it is a story that still resonates today, especially because today's generation of kids don't spend enough time outside. Take your children or grandchildren to the show, and I guarantee you will be tempted to buy them a package of seeds and help them plant a garden.



Christine Norton and Ari Lew rehearse a scene from "Secret Garden" at Harwich Junior Theatre. RON SCHLOERB/CAPE COD TIMES

If you go

What: "The Secret Garden," a musical When: 7:30 p.m. Fridays and 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays through May 3, with vacation week matinees at 11 a.m. April 21 and 2 p.m. April 22-23 Where: Harwich Junior Theatre, 105 Division St., West Harwich. Admission: \$25, \$15 under 21 Tickets: 508-432-2002 or hjtcapecod.org

<http://www.capecodtimes.com/article/20150405/NEWS/150409644>

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