

Blossoming talent

Singers shine in ‘The Secret Garden’

Now that Peppermint Creek Theatre Co. is ensconced in the Miller Performing Arts Center, it faces a problem familiar to nonprofit theater companies: its ambitions are bigger than its performance space. But the best directors rise to the challenge, never letting the space dictate the limits of their creativity. Such is the case with its current production, a musical version of “The Secret Garden.”

As he did with last year’s production of “Dogfight,” See Curtain Call, director Chad Swan-Badgero utilizes every inch of floor space — and then some — to stage a big Broadway musical, complete with a ten-piece orchestra.

The musical is based on Frances Hodgson Burnett’s beloved children’s novel. Mary Lennox (Lauren Kreuer) has been orphaned following a cholera outbreak in colonial India. She is sent to live with her uncle, Archibald Craven (Matt Eldred), in an isolated manor in northern England. With little to do, she roams the property and discovers a locked garden that belonged to her late aunt Lily (Abigail Grill). Mary is also driven to discover the source of crying she hears at night in the big house. With the help of the precipient local boy Dickon (Daniel Shafer), Mary tries to bring the garden back to life while also exorcising the ghosts from the manor to heal the family.

There is something about the construction of the musical that loses some of the mystery and wonder of the original novel. In trying to ensure that adult audiences would be engaged in a play based on a children’s novel, it feels like playwright Marsha Norman focused too heavily on the angst of the adults and neglected to provide time for the bonds between the children to develop naturally. So much time is spent on loss and angst that it’s hard to believe that children in the audience would be entertained. Still, the musical earned seven Tony nominations when it debuted on Broadway in 1991, so it obviously taps into adult nostalgia for the widely read novel.

Swan-Badgero’s crowning achievement in this production is the casting of Shafer as Dickon, who is a welcome relief from the cast of depressed and dour loners. While not a major character, Dickon is the true change agent of the story, giving Mary some much needed hope and guidance. Shafer possesses the requisite charm and innocence needed for the role. He has boyband good looks, but with a voice that’s much too strong and pure for a boy band.

That casting coup is closely followed by the skillful choreography of the company’s scene changes. The crew gracefully glides the garden walls around the stage as if they were dance partners. This keeps the play moving at a decent pace, something critical for a show that clocks in at over two hours.

The cast is a solid ensemble that forges some very beautiful moments. Eldred and Joseph Quick — as Archibald’s brother, Dr. Neville — create a chilling crescendo in the duet “Lily’s Eyes.” Likewise, Grill and Ashley Ault — as Lily’s sister Rose — harmonize gorgeously in “Quartet.” Prize blossoms like these help this “Garden” grow despite its uneven storytelling.

