

Peppermint Creek really delivers enchanting ‘The Secret Garden’

Ken Glickman, For the Lansing State Journal - March 8, 2016

“The Secret Garden” is a musical that opened on Broadway in 1991 and received three Tony awards. But, to my knowledge, the current Peppermint Creek Theater production is the first time a community group has mounted it in the Lansing area.

It’s understandable. Secret Garden is a full-bodied musical requiring mature voices, a complete orchestra and dramatic acting to bring it off.

But Chad Swan-Badgero and his Peppermint Creek folks did just that, and then some.

“Secret Garden” does not have the popularity of a “Wicked” or a “Les Miz”, but it enjoys an almost a cultish following by fans who think that it’s one of the great musicals in the past 30 years.

This musical is adapted from the beloved book by Frances Hodgson Burnett and tells the story of a 10-year-old Mary Lennox who is the only remaining member of her family to have lived after a typhoid epidemic in India at the beginning of the 20th century.

The lonely and angry girl comes to England to live at her Uncle Archibald’s manor in northern England. He is a broken man, still grieving the loss of his wife, Lily.

Things start to look up when Mary meets her servant Martha, the gardener and the magical Dickon who all teach Mary how to repair herself by working in the earth and making a garden.

The music is filled with sumptuous and emotive ballads as well as engaging country music. The ten-piece orchestra (conducted by Seth Burk) did a wonderful job with this demanding score supporting some of the best Broadway-type voices in Lansing.

Matt Eldred as Uncle Archibald wowed the audience with his beautiful tenor voice and his powerful acting. He was matched by the equally strong Joseph Quick as his brother Neville Craven. Together they sang one of the great male duets in the Broadway repertoire, “Lily’s Eyes”.

By all rights, this production should not have been as good as it was. The stage was too small, the set was sparse, and even though the cast had sound enhancement, the orchestra was often too loud for the space.

But all of these liabilities didn’t hamper Badgero’s vision of this show. Each one of his 19 actors seemed devoted to this haunting musical. Racheal Raymer as the jolly servant Martha showed a vibrant personality and charming voice. And Daniel Shafer as Dickon was like a full size elf, displaying impish magic and gave his difficult songs tons of character.

Lauren Kreuer as the young Mary Lennox had her worked cut out for her, singing with all of this great talent, but she did a fine job.

The period costumes (Katy Kettles) were detailed and impressive, and Karyn Perry created imaginative and interpretive dance-type choreography.

