

# A play for children, but adults will enjoy the simple charms

It may take until the second act to kick in, but there is a certain enchanting majesty to *The Magician's Nephew*

J. KELLY NESTRUCK

THEATRE REVIEW

**The Magician's Nephew**  
AT FESTIVAL THEATRE IN  
NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE, ONT.

Written by Michael O'Brien after C.S. Lewis  
Directed by Tim Carroll  
Starring Travis Seetoo, Vanessa Sears, Deborah Hay  
Shaw Festival  
Runs to Oct. 13  
★ ★ ½

It took me until the second act, but eventually I cried uncle to the simple charms of *The Magician's Nephew* at the Shaw Festival.

On Wednesday, artistic director Tim Carroll's second season in charge of the Niagara-on-the-Lake repertory company officially opened with a very tame new stage adaptation of the C.S. Lewis children's novel first published in 1955.

*The Magician's Nephew*, though released sixth in the British novelist and theologian's seven-book Narnia fantasy series, is a prequel to his first, *The Lion, the Witch and The Wardrobe* – which Carroll brought to the stage in a production that did very well at the box office at the Stratford Festival in 2016.

In London in the year 1900, Digory (Travis Seetoo), a young boy with an ailing mother, and his friend Polly (Vanessa Sears) stumble upon the attic lair of his creepy Uncle Andrew (Steven Sutcliffe). This vainglorious amateur magician turns out to have crafted a set of rings out of fairy dust that allow the children to travel to other dimensions.

In one alternative universe, overwhelmed by Alice-like curiosity, Digory wrestles Polly aside to ring a bell and wake a sleeping queen. Jadis (Deborah Hay) is her name and the boy should have let her lie: She has no subjects, having killed them all – and is intent on following the children to other worlds that she can conquer and destroy.

Eventually, the characters beam over to a void where they witness the Genesis-like creation of Narnia – before Aslan (Kyle Blair), the great lion, sends Digory on a quest to save the nascent land from evil. The influence of Christian stories on Lewis's narrative creeps to the surface here, as Digory must wrestle with the temptation to take a bite of a forbidden fruit that a woman offers him.

Playwright Michael O'Brien, who previously brought *The Invisible Man* to the stage for the Shaw Festival, has added a pair of framing devices to his workmanlike adaptation of Lewis's book.

In one, underexplored and unnecessary, Seetoo and Sears play contemporary Canadian children who are conjuring *The Magician's Nephew* through make-believe. In the other, "dream detectives" – aka the Shaw ensemble – tell the audience that they will be bringing fantasy worlds to life by mov-



Travis Seetoo, Vanessa Sears and Matt Nethersole star as Digory, Polly and Fledge in *The Magician's Nephew*. It is a very tame new stage adaptation of British novelist C.S. Lewis's 1955 children's novel and part of his Narnia fantasy series. EMILY COOPER/SHAW FESTIVAL

ing around a bunch of very sturdy cardboard boxes.

Which they do – though designer Cameron Davis's projections sometimes take the magic out of this classic style of theatre by overliteralizing the environment; for instance, projecting a picture of a door onto boxes that have been turned into a door.

For his production, Carroll has reunited with a pair of creatives who worked on his earlier Narnia show at Stratford, giving this one a similar look: Designer Douglas Paraschuk has again built the set, mostly comprised of a semi-circle of screens, while Alexis Milligan is in charge of the movement and puppetry. New designers crawling out of the wardrobe this time around include Jennifer Goodman – whose Victorian costumes are fine, but whose costumes for the contemporary Canadian children are laughably out of touch.

It's the physical elements of the production rather than the efficient, but uninspired, projections that genuinely charm: The extendable wings of a flying horse; a mechanical model of a planetary system; or trees and lampposts that look like children cut-outs.

Just as young-adult fiction has become the backbone of publishing, young-adult drama has become one of the few genres of new plays that can find commercial success these days. Adaptations of *War Horse* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* have had two of the longest runs of non-musical plays on Broadway this century – while *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* looks set to give even *Abie's Irish Rose* a run for its money.

Unlike those shows, however, *The Magician's Nephew* is very much for children, rather than families. It's relaxed, soft and pitched at preteens.

I would not recommend it to unaccompanied adult spectators as even the performances by the first-rate cast are kept very one-dimensional – and the plot, in the exposition-filled first act in particular, is mind-numbing with jokes and music kept to an Anglican minimum. (Michael Theriault, playing a Cockney cabbie who seemed to have wandered

into the action from last year's production of *Me and My Girl*, did get a chuckle or two out of me.)

Once we land in Narnia after intermission, however, there is a certain enchanting majesty to the show. O'Brien's adaptation digs into the emotional stakes a little deeper – and Seetoo brings

complexity to his role of the troubled boy. Likewise, Hay adds a hint of Greek tragedy to her depiction of the villainess.

The 375 elementary-school children who were at the matinee that critics were invited to review seemed rapt – and, afterwards, enthusiastic. One little girl I

spoke to felt the show should get five out of four stars – which you can either take as recommendation, or a further sign that Ontario's math curriculum does indeed need an overhaul.

*The Magician's Nephew* runs till Oct. 13 (shawfest.com).



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