



'The Secret Garden' review: Kirk Mouser's direction takes audience on a memorable trip

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By **Carol Wells, Special to The Oregonian**



A story about the healing power of friendship.

Almost as soon as **"The Secret Garden"** begins, a developing willingness can be perceived in the audience: a confident impulse to go wherever the sure and steady direction of Kirk Mouser takes them.

Without such a firm hand at the helm, there is no telling where this **Lakewood Theatre Company** production might end up. Its centerpiece is, after all, a sickly boy who is borne about the stage in a child-sized wheelchair. The possibilities for the maudlin are legion.

Instead, what arises is a wholly absorbing and genuinely touching story about the healing power of friendship, the gift of surrendering to love, and the wisdom of healthy Yorkshire cooking. The production dazzles with live music and beautiful singing (thanks to musical director Alan D. Lytle) and is fronted by the enormous talent of a young actress and singer, Amber Mitchell, who at age 13

plays Mary Lennox with what seems to be a complete lack of effort.

The musical is based on the familiar novel by **Frances Hodgson Burnett**. The story is that Mary Lennox, a British girl at the turn of the last century, who is living in India when a cholera epidemic kills both her parents. She is sent to England to live with her uncle (played by Bruce Blanchard so sympathetically that we instantly forgive him when he abandons his family and moves to Paris) and his brother (Gary Wayne Cash, who does great work as the perplexed villain) in a cavernous, rambling house, whose vaulted ceilings in John Gerth's excellent set express the dark mystery of a Gothic cathedral.

Mary, who has had to fend for herself in India, meets Martha (the endearing Malia Tippetts), a chambermaid, and Dickon (James Langston-Drake, who plays the role with a twinkle in his eye), a gardener, and Colin (Everett Pearson), the aforementioned sickly child, and learns to make friends. With their help, she finds

"The Secret Garden"

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, and various 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday performances, through June 12

Where: Lakewood Center for the Arts, 368 S. State St., Lake Oswego

Tickets: \$29-\$32, 503-635-3901 or

and restores a secret garden belonging to Colin's late mother Lily (Joy Martin, who has an ethereal voice).

**lakewood-
center.org**

The music, the acting, the set, the lighting all work together to express the powerlessness of childhood, for Mary, and the agony of grief, for her uncle. When these circumstances are mitigated by love and friendship in a succession of lovely and moving songs, we feel well rewarded for having allowed the director to lead us on this journey.

-- **Carol Wells**

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