

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Is Matilda Everything She Could Be?

Sylvie · Thursday, June 11th, 2015

Two years ago — June 6, 2013, to be exact — [I wrote a piece for Cultural Weekly](#) about the importance of distinguishing what is organic and authentic in the theatre and what is not. I drew comparisons in the approach employed by disparate productions (not in their level of success, which is a different story), and to make my point I used *Matilda The Musical* and *Kinky Boots*, both of which were new on Broadway and itching for their 2013 Tony close-up.

Fast forward to last Sunday, June 7, when the touring company of *Matilda* launched its national tour at The Ahmanson Theatre after two years on Broadway and hours before the 2015 Tonys were to air on CBS. This touring *Matilda* is not a vastly altered show, but theatre is a sensitive plant and changing from any space to another brings minor or major adjustments that can make for unexpected differences.

Roald Dahl, who wrote the original children's book on which *Matilda The Musical* is based, writes dark stories for children. Warm, fuzzy (and dull) they are not. They take into account the world as it is rather than as we wish it to be. He likes to make his readers think, regardless of their age.

Below is part of what I wrote about this musical then:

“With *Matilda*, perhaps because of its origins as a dark and cartoonish children's book, the stage adaptation relies heavily on broadly sketched adult characters—caricatures as viewed through the eyes of a child in all cases but one—and while the talent of the actors is unquestionable, they are stuck with the dispassionate tone of the material. Meanwhile, a couple of other things strike imaginative but distracting notes: Rob Howell's set, composed of children's building blocks and floor-to-ceiling moveable shelves laden with books, emerges as more cumbersome than inspired—and Hugh Vanstone's darting play with lights suggests a desperate Tinker Bell hoping to bridge the distance between stage and viewer with sheer agitation.

“This enterprise comes off as an odd cross between Charles Dickens and Tim Burton, not only in the loping capers of... Miss Trunchbull (a fascinatingly insecure relative of *Annie's* Miss Hannigan), but in what I can only describe as the aura of the entire production. There is plenty of room for admiration, but not enough for a satisfying connection.”



Mia Sinclair Jenness and the Company of *Matilda The Musical* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

At The Ahmanson, Rob Howell's set Hugh Vanstone's lighting seem less intrusive and

overbearing than they did on Broadway, possibly only in my perception — and not just because they each scored a Tony best in 2013. (The Tonys are an unreliable benchmark, and *Matilda* did not make much of a showing at the time; the only other Tony the show won was for Book of a Musical, and bookwriter Dennis Kelly has to cede at least some of that credit to Dahl.)

Matilda at The Ahmanson remains a show you admire more than you love, and even that is qualified admiration. It is a strangely harsh show that only fully comes alive in the second half, which is a vast improvement on the first, much of which treads water. The exposition is lengthy (in a lengthy show) and the one-dimensional nature of the cartoon characters — Matilda Wormwood's mom, dad and dopey brother who constitute rest of the Wormwood family, and the eponymous Miss Trunchbull — have everything to do with the slackness of that reaction.



Jennifer Blood (L), Evan Gray (front center), Bryce Ryness (R) and the company of *Matilda The Musical* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Kelly's book, director Matthew Warchus and especially the excellent choreographer Peter Darling, ratchet up not only the action, but also the inventiveness in that second half, wherein Matilda develops astonishing superhuman powers, and her battle lines with Miss Trunchbull are decisively drawn. That Trunchbull gets a full turn at some really villainous behavior and the ensemble of schoolchildren finally gets a real crack at revenge, blossoms into contagious fun at last.

A level of humanity also manages to creep in and score a few points when we learn about Miss Honey's improbably painful childhood and Matilda decides to try to rectify that situation. So goodness, and even some wit, begin to overtake evil, as the Wormwoods and that old bat Trunchbull have to face the music. There is a bit of talk about all stories not necessarily having happy endings, but when all is said and done, this story ends quite happily.



Evan Gray (top center) and the children's ensemble in *Matilda The Musical* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

On the whole, the show feels more cohesive now than on that initial New York viewing, but it does not overcome the caricature effect. Tim Minchin's musical score is not particularly distinguished, certainly not enough to make us forget that we are still watching mostly stick figures working hard, and not always succeeding, at being larger than life.

As is so often the case, the actors almost always triumph over the shortcomings of the roles they are handed, and the ones in this show are no exception. Cassie Silva and Quinn Mattfeld as Mrs. and Mr. Wormwood, respectively, have a rollicking time wildly overplaying their parts, while Bryce Ryness, endowed with an oversized bosom propped up on toothpick legs, delivers a very mannish, nasty and appropriately grotesque Miss Trunchbull.

Only Ora Jones, colorful as a Caribbean Mrs. Phelps, the librarian who both helps and is intimidated by Matilda's intelligence and determination, and Jennifer Blood as Miss Honey, the sweet (and slightly bloodless) teacher who befriends Matilda, betray some heart and plenty of bewilderment in the show's only straightforward adults.

The role of Matilda is shared by three young actors. At Sunday's opener, Mia Sinclair Jenness delivered a strong performance as Matilda (the other two are Gabby Gutierrez and Mabel Tyler).

She was engaging, if perhaps a little too serious and calculated. But then Matilda can't miss. However you slice it, she always trumps all the adults in the room.

Finally, a word about sound design. Some space was devoted in last Thursday's edition of Cultural Weekly to a discussion of the technical difficulties confronting today's sound editing in the theatre (and elsewhere). [Adam Leipzig](#), [Cultural Weekly's publisher](#), wrote that "excellent, clear, well-balanced sound is entirely possible" these days and that "with newer technologies, it is easier [to achieve] than ever before. It simply takes venues that value sound quality as much as all other aspects of the audience experience, and producers who put the resources of time and attention toward achieving it."

The sound at *Matilda* on Sunday was compromised. It was difficult to catch every word, as it still is in too many productions at too many venues. I am not a sound engineer and know little about what it would take to improve sound quality. But I do know that in this era of miked actors, the amplification often increases volume at the expense of clarity. Any feedback about this issue would be useful and appreciated. If you see the show, leave us a comment. The more attention we can bring to the problem, the better the chance of inspiring people to try to fix it.

Top image: The children's ensemble on swings in Matilda the Musical at The Ahmanson Theatre.

All photos by Joan Marcus.

WHAT: *Matilda The Musical*

WHERE: Center Theatre Group, Ahmanson Theatre, 135 North Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Friday at 8 pm; Saturdays, 2 & 8 pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm pm. Exception: Saturday, July 4, noon and 5:30pm. Ends July 12.

HOW: Tickets, \$25-\$175 (subject to change), available by phone at 213.972.4400 or online at www.CenterTheatreGroup.org or in person at the Center Theatre Group box office at the Music Center. Deaf community information and charge: TDD 213.680.4017.

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