

## **A VIEW FROM THE STALLS – JULY 27, 2007**

### **His Dark Materials (Part I) - July 2007**

Back in 1997 we saw our third Scottish Youth Theatre Production - it was "Into the Woods" and we really enjoyed it (despite a little confusion over if there was a second half or not). The following day the Glasgow Herald published a review which was far from complimentary, making a number of criticisms of the musical itself and the stage effects that the production had used, but making almost no mention of the performances. Feeling the review to be unfair we sent off a fax that morning to the cast saying how unhappy we had been with the Herald review and expressing our own opinions that the performance had been just as enjoyable as we had seen in previous years. A few days later we received a nice letter from the SYT saying that the cast had been really down after the Herald review and that our fax had been a real pick-me-up for them to hear positive reviews from someone unconnected with the show. I say all this because I'm now going to try my hardest not to produce our own updated version of that disheartening Herald review, while keeping to our policy of reviewing all shows as if professional performances.

Based on the best selling trilogy of novels by Philip Pullman and adapted by Nicholas Wright "His Dark Materials" had been a major hit for the National Theatre in London, so we went into this with high hopes. Okay, lets get the problems out of the way first. At an official run time of 3 hours this was way overlong, and when the actual performance runs a further 30 minutes this is far beyond what is reasonable to expect from an audience. There will always be problems adapting novels for the stage and I'm unsure how tied the SYT was to the existing adaptation, but this could have been halved without losing the central feel and themes involved. As a result the majority of the audience spent at least the last 50 minutes wishing each scene to be the last - not the best state of mind for appreciating some of the show's funniest scenes. To be honest, after the first 30 minutes the show had lost a substantial part of the audience as with a lack of humour and sharp dialogue to generate laughs the audience fell into a mode of sitting in silence, and then later when there were touches of humour the chance to create that kind of mood had been lost. There were nice touches such as the choreographed dance/fight and the marching scenes but much of the enthusiasm and goodwill of the audience was used up long before the end.

I admire the SYT for their ambition, and can appreciate how difficult it would be to turn down the chance to do this show, but it was a bad decision. To keep the attention of audiences for over 6 hours requires a level of entertainment that the material in the current format simply doesn't provide.

There are positive aspects to the production including an excellent realisation of the daemons with Alasdair Hankinson's "Pantalaimon" and Kendra Williams as "Salcilia" particularly expressive. Kirstie Steele gives a hugely impressive performance as the show-carrying "Lyra" while Andrew Jones as "Roger", Sandy Howie as "Iorek", Katya Allcott as "Master" and Andrew John Illsley as "Will" all provide strong support. There were problems with some of the other performances, including some dialogue being lost to the music (even near the front of the stalls) but for the most part the supporting cast performed well. We were drained watching the show, I can only imagine how the cast feel at the end of it.

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At the end of the day, I did enjoy large parts of the show but it simply dragged on for so long that it took any fun out of it. We've got a couple of days to rebuild our enthusiasm before we see Part 2 back at the Citizens, but the high hopes I had for this are now a distant memory.