

“A Little Bit of Mischief” and a Whole Lot of Magic at *Matilda*

BY MELANIE BAKER

With a record-breaking treasure chest of Olivier Awards in its arsenal, and sell-out runs at The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and London’s West End, there’s little doubt that *Matilda* will soar on this side of the pond as Broadway audiences surrender to its myriad charms.



Manuel Harlan

Inside the classroom of Broadway’s *Matilda*

Based on the beloved childhood tale by Roald Dahl (*Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*), *Matilda* delves into the world of a precocious, knowledge-devouring girl whose keen sense of right, wrong, and the deep flaws of adulthood catapult her far beyond her young age. With her sharp awareness (and a timely discovery of her uncanny telekinetic powers), Matilda is able to navigate and conquer the harsh world of parents (who hardly notice her) and a wrecking ball of a school principal, “the Trunchbull.”

Bringing the world-acclaimed tale to the stage from book and screen (the 1996 film directed by Danny DeVito starred Mara Wilson in the title role) had to be a monumental task, accomplished with endless surprises thanks to a creative team that includes a book by Dennis Kelly, music and lyrics by Tim Minchin, and madly inventive direction by Tony winner Matthew Warchus. The collaborative efforts for

Matilda garnered the show seven Olivier Awards, more than any other show in Olivier history.

Which brings us to another member of this collaborative brain trust: Rob Howell, transformative visionary in the world of set and costume design, whose creations manage to straddle the vibrant realm of childhood and the adult world that fails to be illuminated by the vivacious, tenacious, and awe-inspiring children surrounding it.

Howell, who collected one of the seven Olivier statues, is modest, and nibbles from the humblest of pies when it comes to his work on the show that involves images, sets, and costumes seemingly etched from a childhood dream. His whimsical set pieces—larger-than-life alphabet tiles that envelop and border the stage—not only add geometric dimension but, “allow us to put words quite literally in the air, and those words underpin the central thread of the story that *Matilda* carries,” he explains.

Matilda’s love of books, and the solace she finds in imaginary stories, is brought to the foreground through the tiles, allowing audiences to fall in love with literary escape alongside the pint-size protagonist.

Howell’s visuals, however, extend far beyond the tiles: musical numbers are choreographed onto eye-popping, oversized swings, and a dank schoolroom is elevated to a kid-crazed war zone as the repressed students of Matilda’s school finally take a stand against the meaty Trunchbull in the ultimate uprising

Audiences will fall in love with “literary escape” alongside the pint-size protagonist...

anthem, “Revolting Children.”

Howell brings his innovative eye to the costumes as well—especially when creating a look for the harrowing personage of Miss Agatha Trunchbull.

Although Dahl’s original text and the film adaptation provided good source material for the designer, he relied on Olivier winner Bertie Carvel, a British chameleon of stage and screen, to bring the transformation to life. “It’s easy to just put somebody in a fat suit,” says Howell, “but what we tried to do is give the look some reason... a sense of truth so you believe that [Trunchbull] lives that life.”

Howell sought to skew reality when it came to the over-the-top villain. “We wanted [the costume] to be something uncommon in everyday life. She wears a coat and a belt. So what’s the big deal? We all wear belts, but we chose a strange belt... we wanted it to be unsettling.”

Carvel, like his cross-dressing predecessors who played Edna Turnblatt in *Hairspray*, threw himself into his character—so much so that his recreation of Trunchbull’s reign of terror will most surely bring down the house. He will be challenged, of course, by the four girls cast to play the role of Matilda: Sophia Gennusa, Oona Laurence, Bailey Ryon, and Milly Shapiro. (Qualifications? Spunk, verve, and impressive pipes to handle such ear-catching tunes as the slightly mischievous number “Naughty.”)

And while the girls were cast on U.S. soil, at least one other key British cast member, Lauren Ward, will reprise her role of Miss Honey, Matilda’s guidepost and warm-hearted teacher.

Indeed, at the show’s conclusion, it is Matilda’s relationship with Miss Honey that speaks loudest of all, illuminating how adults and children can learn from each other in the world as equals.

Matilda the Musical is playing at the Shubert Theatre, 225 W. 44th St. For tickets, call 212-239-6200 or visit www.matildathemusical.com. Previews begin 3/4 for a 4/11 opening.



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