

Secret Garden a mystical production
By Carrie Moore, Custer County Chronicle

It was magical. It was memorizing. It was mystical.

And that was just the first act.

The Black Hills Playhouse went for a repeat in success this season, bringing the classic children's story "The Secret Garden" to life. And boy, did they deliver.

The Secret Garden opens with Mary Lennox (Tori Glazier), a 10-year-old English girl living in India, dreaming nursery rhymes and Hindi chants. After waking up, she learns that her parents and nearly everyone she knows has died of cholera. She is found by survivors of the outbreak and sent to England to live with her uncle, Archibald Craven (Matt Nesmith), whom she has never met.

In the first act of the play, Mary adjusts to her new life in England, meeting her uncle, who still mourns his dead wife, Lily (Emily Cherry, who has quite the set of pipes on her!), and his brother, Dr. Neville Craven (Clayton Gerrard) and the servants. Mary later finds out that the house is haunted by ghosts and spirits of Archibald and Mary's pasts, such as Lily, Mary's parents, officers from India and Mary's Ayah (nanny). Mary's chambermaid, Martha (Cecilia Quintero), encourages her to play on the moorland and in the garden. Mary soon learns of the secret garden Lily had and sets out to find it. While trying to find the garden, Mary uncovers more secrets in the Craven home.

In the second act, Mary and others must confront the ghosts of their pasts in order to find happiness and a better life. And as far as Mary finding the garden, well, you're going to have to see that for yourself.

In her debut on the Black Hills Playhouse stage, Tori Glazier is, simply put, brilliant as Mary Lennox. She's bratty, she's encouraging. She's immature, she's thoughtful. She's spoiled, she's forgiving. No, she's not bi-polar, just a typical 10-year-old girl. And Glazier plays it all with ease. She perfectly channeled her energy into the role, making me laugh with her witty remarks and cry over her vulnerability. And if that's not enough, she even sang while skipping rope — that's some talent right there! Something tells me this won't be the first time we see Glazier on the stage.

While Mary's emotions are all over the place, Archibald Craven is stoic, to say the least. After seeing how much his niece reminds him of his deceased wife, he isn't too crazy about being around Mary. He's still lost in the past, thinking of Lily and even seeing her. Matt Nesmith did a wonderful job with a tough character. While he's authoritative and in pain, it's clear to see he still has a softer side. And in the final scene, you can't help but be moved to tears.

For those who have read the book, the musical is a touch different. While the focus in the book was on Mary and her interactions with Martha and her brother, Dickon, and cousin, Colin, the musical adds more significance to the older characters, showing their history and connecting their lives. And in the musical, the dreamers — the ghosts of Archibald and Mary's pasts — move the story by singing and even moving props to set up the next scenes.

The dreamers are a wonderful touch to "The Secret Garden." Having only read the book, I didn't know what to make of them when director Dan Workman introduced them. They tell the story? They move set pieces around?

“My focus was on telling the story and using the dreamers in the story and moving it forward,” Workman said.

In the book you get the background of Mary’s life through her, while the dreamers share that perspective in the production. They show the audience what happened in both Mary and Archibald’s lives, which is both beautiful and heartbreaking.

“(It was important) to focus on story telling, so that was a challenge for choreography,” said Deb Workman, who had choreographed “The Secret Garden” eight years previously under a different director. “Since the characters are from India and England, there was a lot more research into the dances.”

How to use the dreamers on set was also a challenge for scenic designer Kathy Voecks, who decided to have them help move things for different scenes.

“There’s eight different locations in the show, so we had to figure out a way to make that transition seamless,” she said. “Transitioning the garden from winter to summer was a challenge.”

For me, the costumes were everything. When I first thought of the dreamers as ghosts, white sheets over a body popped into my mind, like something out of “A Christmas Carol.” Thank goodness costume designer Amber Marisa Cook didn’t have the same vision.

“I avoided the all-white for dreamers, but wanted to keep them ethereal looking,” she said.

In a way to do that, Cook focused on garden elements in the costumes and kept vibrant colors in certain aspects of the clothing, which could trigger a memory. The roses on Lily’s dress were a perfect reminder of her love for the garden and the touch of brightness on Mary’s Ayah hinted to her culture.

“The servants are also affected by Mary’s prescience, so they go from neutral tones to light, bright and floral clothing,” she added.

The Black Hills Playhouse’s “Secret Garden” is an enchanting production based on a classic literary tale. “The Secret Garden” has a message for everyone. To find out what, you’ll just have to check it out.

“The Secret Garden,” rated PG, runs through Sunday, July 6, with evening shows at 7:30 p.m. (except Sundays and Mondays) and Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. For more information on the Black Hills Playhouse, visit blackhillsplayhouse.com.