

Farm Hands

Theater review: Charlotte's Web

By Erik Eskilsen

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No doubt the Great Books debate still rages somewhere, pitting advocates of the Dead White Male canon against those promoting a more culturally diverse literature. In children's lit, however, the Great Books debate was settled nearly 60 years ago. The results are as follows: E.B. White's 1952 book *Charlotte's Web*, illustrated by Garth Williams, is the Greatest Book Ever for kids. Eudora Welty reportedly called it "just about perfect." The Newbery Medal speaks for itself. And the numerous adaptations — a couple of movies, one video game and one widely performed play — underscore the point.

At Burlington's Off Center for the Dramatic Arts, the last of these remixes — playwright Joseph Robinette's early '80s script — is currently getting a remix of its own, as puppets and their human perpetrators populate the Zuckermans' fictional farm. This bold treatment from the Saints and Poets Production Company pushes White's fable to another level of fantasy: talking animals represented by inanimate objects. An energetic, confident cast largely sells the concept, preserving the wonder in White's original story, but not without moments of doubt — about a certain pig's fate as well as some of this production's artistic choices.

Charlotte's Web is the second of three puppet adaptations of otherwise corporeal compositions pegged to Saints and Poets. The first was last October's *The Rocky Horror (Puppet) Show*, a handy spin on the sexy '70s cult musical play and flick. A staging of Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*, a dark dalliance with, among other things, child murder and tortured souls, is slated to open November 3. This makes the all-ages *Charlotte's Web* a curious choice for a troupe with an appetite for edgy.

That's not to say this play lacks *any* edge. Turns out life on the farm is not all that laid back. No sooner is Wilbur the pig born on the Arable homestead than he confronts the specter of death. The runt of the litter, he's saved from the axe by kindhearted farm girl Fern Arable. While Wilbur is soon enjoying a culinary bounty of table scraps, he learns that a deal that seems too good to be true probably is. All the favor the Arabes show him before handing him off to farm neighbors, the Zuckermans, is just fattening him for slaughter.

The urgency of Wilbur's situation inspires a spider named Charlotte to intervene on his behalf. Though she's in declining health and of advanced age, Charlotte musters the energy to spin a few web manifestos for her porcine pal. She starts with the words "Some pig," which draw an onslaught of onlookers from beyond the barn. She proceeds to weave "terrific," "radiant" and "humble," lifting Wilbur to celebrity status and out of danger.

In the hands — rather, *on* the hands — of director Jess Wilson's cast, this slyly serious, deceptively deep story is animated with buoyancy and cheer. The principal players appear to relish their literal supporting roles, using voice acting and physical gesture to project personality into the puppets. As Templeton the Rat, Seth Jarvis snivels about, a bandy-legged barnyard Bogart who sticks his neck out for no one — until there's something in it for him.

Marianne DiMascio is all aflutter, a Goose on one arm, a Gander on the other, as she delivers two distinct voices with enthusiasm and humor. Jess Bernard handles her Sheep and Lamb more gingerly, giving them two soft voices. As the play's eponymous web spinner, Chris Caswell affects a grandiose presence in inverse proportion to her spider's size. She is positively regal in the role, her lithe, graceful movements an apt metaphor for her artful spider's intricate work. Playing the pig in peril, Jordan Gullikson imbues Wilbur with credible naïveté and vulnerability, thanks to a repertoire of facial expressions that range from bewildered to terrified.

Catherine Alston's costumes subtly enhance these characterizations, from Bernard's wool cap to Caswell's black knit sweater and web-inspired jewelry to Gullikson's plain white overalls.

While such strong performances feed the play a steady diet of comedic moments, they also reveal *Charlotte's* mixed breeding. At times, the players upstage the puppets, reducing them to pillowy props. Such was not the case in the troupe's *Rocky Horror* redux, where the puppets commanded more of the audience's attention. In *Charlotte's Web*, the focus remains largely on the human actors. It's difficult to say whether more lifelike puppets than Dani Bohnke's agri-avatars might have achieved a more unified effect. In any case, this show is less successful as a work of puppet theater than as a conventional play. One can easily imagine this talented cast pulling off an engaging rendition without any puppets at all.

This unevenness may speak to Wilson's directorial inexperience. In this, her directorial debut, she draws strong performances from her barnyard cast, which includes some of the community's most consistent actors. She might have coaxed more multidimensional portrayals, however, from her secondary players — in particular, farm couples John and Martha Arable (Ed Roberts and Patricia Julien) and Homer and Edith Zuckerman (Bob Carmody and Mary Scripps). In children's literature, adults are often rendered superficially. On stage, the contrast is conspicuous, made more so by the boundless vitality of kid actors

Eva Espenshade as Fern Arable and Eleanor Weisman-Rowell as kid sister Avery. G. Richard Ames also stands out among the farm folk, playing hired man Lurvy, who clomps around in a perpetual “Aw, shucks” state, as if trying to find his way back to the set of *Oklahoma*.

As the story’s guitar-plucking narrator, Rick Homan makes a pleasant addition to the cast, giving the play another layer of folksy, kid-friendly veneer. Homan plays a few other minor roles. Kevin Christopher rounds out the roster, drawing chuckles for his pig portrayal of Uncle, Wilbur’s county-fair rival for the blue ribbon, and for his double-fisted performance of a pair of puppet fair judges.

For all its playful variations on *Charlotte’s* enduring themes — friendship pitted against the immutable cycles of life and death — this production remains true to the tale’s spirit. While the beloved fable and puppets may not be the snuggest fit here, the play suggests a troupe unafraid to reach a bit and grasp at something fresh.