

Saints & Poets Production Company's The Witches Is an Inventive Ride

By ALEX BROWN

The **Saints & Poets Production Company's** production of *The Witches* hauls out a big trunk filled with theatrical effects and unpacks them all for our delight. Director **Kevin Christopher** and the energetic 13-member cast use everything from video to puppetry, plus a dollop of special effects, to present David Wood's theatrical adaptation of Roald Dahl's story of a boy thwarting a group of witches.

Now playing at the Black Box Theater at **Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center**, the show follows young Boy after his parents die and he is raised by his charming, iconoclastic Grandmother. Grandmother warns him about the witches, whose central concern is ridding the Earth of children. Along with Boy, we learn how to recognize a witch thanks to a hilarious "spotter's guide" film that blends adult irony and kid-centric humor, a style that infuses the entire production.

You may not want to scratch too deep at the subtext here. Dahl's witches are women desperate to conceal their scabbed and bald scalps, their lack of toes and fingernails, and their creepy, blue saliva. Surface appearance and deception are their key preoccupations. Hidden by wigs and vapid charm, they pass among us, sniffing out children, whom they are passionate about scouring off the planet. Fits right in with Mother's Day, doesn't it?

Obviously, Dahl's story has to be enjoyed without any feminist deconstruction. There's no explanation for the evil that animates the witches, but there is a perfect hero ready to foil them. Accept, and enjoy, the hyperbolic characterizations. In addition to witches, the show skewers overzealous parents and greedy children and lets stuffy lawyers, self-important functionaries and vain chefs annihilate themselves.

A sense of fun infuses every aspect of the production. The gaggle of witches (**Kerry Cameron, Eva Espenshade, Tracey Girdich, Michele Miller** and **Kit Rivers**) roars onstage to attend the annual witches' conclave with all the lighthearted enthusiasm of schoolgirls. Clad in ridiculous wigs and exuberant

spring-green frocks of a long-past fashion era, the witches convey their eagerness to rid the world of children the way kids themselves might jostle their way onto a merry-go-round. Their good humor makes them seem harmless, but after they've provoked our laughter, their deadly intent remains.

Happily, we can turn to our hero, Boy, to defeat their plans. The particulars shouldn't be revealed, but the joyous energy with which his task is accomplished is worth celebrating. Christopher makes use of a fog machine, strobe lights and classic stagecraft tricks to let Boy achieve what clueless adults cannot.

Christopher has many fun ideas and a cast and crew eager to execute them. The only stumbling blocks are the transitions. On opening night, the pace of the show was too slow to support what should have been buoyant movement from effect to effect. As the run continues, audiences may see a more fluid, lively tempo.

As Grandmother, theater veteran **Ruth Wallman** stitches together all of her character's qualities as if into a beautiful quilt. She's spunky, clever, warm, opinionated, a little crazy and just plain adorable, especially when we feel the love she has for Boy. **Isabelle Fenn** gives Boy the matter-of-fact courage that children possess when there's really no choice about conquering a fear. She's also an excellent puppeteer when her character transforms into a mouse.

Mario Houle plays Bruno, an arrogant, pampered kid. Houle has razor-sharp concentration in each scene, fine comic timing and the necessary aplomb to scarf down doughnuts. As the Grand High Witch, **Marianne DiMascio** sometimes lets screechy vocals stand in for evil, but she conveys her character's scheming with entertaining exaggeration.

The original music by cast member **Patricia Julien** creates mood without overwhelming the live action. Her score accomplishes the cool trick of feeling absolutely modern (with undertones of EDM) and thoroughly timeless, all while hitting just the right horror notes.

A large, multilevel set of platforms makes up the central set. All the levels and angles allow for great variety in blocking, but unfortunately a lot of the story just can't play out on a waterfall of levels. This consigns the major scenes to the flat islands on the extreme left or right, putting the grand platform structure in the way of the key character interactions. Still, the platform provides for some big entrances and exits, and if its levels are a tad underutilized, they are valuable when needed.

The puppets, designed by **Meghan Dewald**, are visually clever. She clearly likes building puppets that transform, and these changes provoke both laughs and wonder.

The show is suitable for children ages 8 and older and is laugh-out-loud entertaining for adults, as well. Dahl's story explores some of the major concerns of childhood: fear, tyrannical adults, death and courage. And the moral is universal: Love is what creatures need.

"The Witches," adapted by David Wood from a book by Roald Dahl, directed by Kevin Christopher, produced by Saints & Poets Production Company. Thursday through Saturday, May 16 to 18, at 7 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, May 18 and 19, at 2 p.m. at the Black Box Theater at Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center, Burlington. \$15-20. Info, 863-5966.