

MATILDA THE MUSICAL

Mayflower Theatre Southampton until 6th July then continuing to tour

Review: 12th June, 2019

What started out in 2010 to be The Royal Shakespeare Company's Christmas show at their Stratford theatre as 'Matilda, A Musical' went on to dominate the world. Such was its success in Stratford-Upon-Avon that the Tim Minchin penned musical adapted by Dennis Kelly from Roald Dahl's bestseller moved to London as 'Matilda, The Musical' with its first night at London's Cambridge Theatre in November 2011. At the Olivier Awards it won a record breaking seven awards from its 10 nominations. Broadway beckoned and it opened at the Shubert Theatre on 11 April 2013 where it ran until January 2017. A second US company was formed and in May 2015 a nationwide tour of America began. An Australian and New Zealand tour also commenced in 2015. It wasn't until March of 2018 that a UK tour was launched, which prompts the question as to why in Britain do we have to wait so long before major new shows are toured?



So, at last 'Matilda, The Musical' arrives in Southampton, the last port of call before the tour finishes in Bristol in August. Its almost 9 years since the show first amazed the theatre world with its originality and the public are still lured by the same promises. The reaction can be summed up by a posting from the theatre today "Winner of over 85 international awards, including 16 for Best Musical, Matilda The Musical comes to delight Southampton audiences this summer! Saturdays all sold out, best availability Monday-Thursday. "Believe the hype" – New York Post, "Easily the standout musical of the decade" – Sunday Times."

This production is absolutely brilliant in every respect, how commercial producers must be sitting back wringing their hands at how their taxes are being used to subsidise the development of such an extravagant production; I'm not sure that's what the RSC was established for. Behind this production is designer Rob Howell, choreographer Peter Darling with orchestrations and additional music from Christopher Nightingale. Hugh Vanstone's lighting, Simon Baker's sound and Paul Kieve's special effects and illusions set this show apart.



The current casting must be amongst the best in the show's history. Elliot Harper who plays Miss Trunchbull is one of the best interpretations of a fictional character I remember seeing. Carly Thoms as Miss Honey, Sebastien Torkia and Rebecca Thornhill as Matilda's parents play their parts to the full. In fact, just one short scene, the transition from the Interval to Act 2, Sebastien Torkia's performance is a standout theatrical moment. But this show is about the kids, big and small, and never has a company worked so well or so hard, the role of Matilda is demanding in every respect and makes 'Annie' look like a role for an apprentice, no matter which of the children's companies are performing I can assure you that Matilda will be a leading lady you will remember.



But.....for me the show itself is a let-down. Dennis Kelly and Tim Minchin's collaboration is a story looking for a purpose. It can't make up its mind what it wants to be and so it's a mish-mash of comedy, drama, tragedy and musical – relentless in every respect. Its not a story for little ones, nor for internet savvy teens. The storyline undermines the performances, there is nothing as threatening as the Child-catcher in Chitty, there is little empathy with any of the characters as they all, children and adults, display extremes of human nature. It's like it set out to be an "Into The Woods" for the 21st century, but Tim Minchin is no Stephen Sondheim and cannot muster the subtlety that such a creation requires.

Oh well, like the two previous RSC musical productions, Les Mis and Carrie, you either love it or hate it.