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Shouting out MCC's 'Garden' secrets

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performing Arts Center opened a sweeping and lush production of "The Secret Garden," a musical drama. Throughout the performance, hidden treasures of creativity and talent blossomed.

starkly leafless tree--backlit in deep lavenders and purple, and the music was a beautiful blend of lush and melodic strains. The scene presented a beautiful and moving performance to Allyson Van Patten's direction and producer.

the same title, provided opportunity for a stunning mix of music and drama. Central character Mary Lennox (double-cast,

played by Tessa Georgie opening night) is orphaned at 10 when a cholera outbreak robs her of not just her parents, but the English military friends and East Indian domestics with whom she'd bonded. Memories of them, embodied by ensemble members, haunt Mary as she attempts to adjust to life at the Craven mansion in England with her widowed Uncle Archibald Craven (Ben Robbins) and his crippled son Colin (also double-cast, played by Jared Mortensen opening night). Of central haunting importance is also Archibald's dead wife Lily (Katie McCarthy).

What sounds like a terribly depressing story, last night, lent itself instead to remarkable and uplifting artistic expression. For instance, a simple, flowing red silk scarf signifying death was attached to each 'Dreamer's' (the collective title given to the deceased cast members) wrist or costume. The brightly contrasting crimson added an especially effective dimension to the choreography.

In addition, a less-macabre-than-magical technical feat onstage transformed the mosquito-netted bed of India into a coffin carried by pallbearers of a somber funeral procession during the opening scene. Moreover, crisply enunciated consonants ensured every expository lyric precisely carried to the back of the house. They were trumped only by the haunting melodies and perfectly blended harmonies of the Dreamer chorus numbers.

Then there's the lovely matter of concealed vocal and acting secrets gradually released as the show unfolded. The chilling purity in the "I Heard Someone Crying" trio exemplified it well. Led by a sadly curious (and capably-voiced) Mary, tormented Archibald and angelic Lily eventually joined the number with a backdrop of ghostly deathlike choreography by Dreamers clad in beautifully swirling period gowns.

As Mary's friend Dickon relayed in the first act, "Lots of things which look dead is just biding their time"...; they might actually be very real and present, just concealed while they search for a safe place to grow. That is, 'They're not gone, just dead.'

The thing is, Robbins (as Archibald)--throughout the evening--had the kind of effortless, earthy tenor tone that comes along once in a hundred male voices. It stood (maybe above!) in rich contrast to Broadway superstar Mandy Patinkin whose, albeit pleasant, thinner and more vibrato-heavy pipes originated the role. Robbins' character creation was no less genuine than his vocal quality.



Allyson Van Patten / Mesa Community College

Implausibly, with vulnerable, open heart and voice to match Robbins', McCarthy (as Lily) consistently lilted to her character's stratospheric notes. The most certain indicator she is no longer mortal seemed to be those celestially graceful soprano phrases.

Another performance that packed a surprise punch was Brie Wadsworth as the playful, witty and wise Yorkshire chamber maid, Martha. Her interaction with both Mary and Colin provided critical support and compassion to the central story. Though she had sung several numbers and embraced the role in likable enough fashion, it wasn't until near the end of Act II that she brought down the house and even drew tears with her velvety chest voice as she encouraged Mary to "Hold On" in the most inspirational ballad of the evening.

The evening's drawbacks were barely mentionable.... It's tricky...for both Dickon and Martha to master the Yorkshire dialect, particularly when Martha's flowing red locks and Dickon's leprechaun-like charm bend the audience's ears toward an Irish accent.

On the whole, the best part is that "The Secret Garden" continues to run this weekend and next. Those able to steal away to MCC's Performing Arts Center will uncover with delighted surprise the secrets that grow from just this Mesa bit of earth.

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