

Imagination Stage bestows a truly ‘Magic’ touch



Margot Schulman/Margot Schulman - Lucy (Megan Graves) uses her magic finger on a rude litterbug (Phillip Reid) in Roald Dahl's "The Magic Finger" at Imagination Stage.

By Celia Wren,

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It can be disconcerting to have a sense of justice. No one knows this better than Lucy, the heroine of the children's play "The Magic Finger," now in a world-premiere run at Imagination Stage. A little girl endowed with a fiery temper, keen moral awareness and a willful, spell-casting digit, Lucy feels shocked and guilty after she turns three hunters into ducks.

Her remorseful stupefaction comes through clearly in director Kathryn Chase Bryer's careful production of this dark and provocative, if humorous, tale, adapted by David Wood from [Roald Dahl's book](#) of the same title. Looking adorable in pastel clothes, her mouth gaping,

her red hair streaming down her back, actress Megan Graves's Lucy radiates dazed astonishment as she watches the outcome of her own sorcery.

That sorcery is almost, but not quite, beyond Lucy's control: When she becomes indignant, the enchanted finger works eerie transformations on her enemies. The little girl hates cruelty to animals, so she's appalled to learn that her friend William (Matthew Schleigh) and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Gregg (Eric Messner and Leigh Jameson), shoot ducks for fun. Pretty soon, the magic finger is letting rip (lighting designer Cory Ryan Frank helps create this and other wizardly moments): The Greggs shrink to bird-size and sprout wings, while the once-hunted ducks grow arms, move into the Gregg family home and learn to use shotguns.

It's a scenario freighted with ethical subtext, and partly for this reason, this show is a less giddy experience than "[James and the Giant Peach](#)," director Janet Stanford's Dahl-based production, which is running in repertory with "The Magic Finger." (Following an extension, Imagination Stage's Dahl repertory plays through June 2.)

Still, Bryer and her actors and designers emphasize the humor and wondrousness in the human-waterfowl switcheroo. When we first glimpse the ducks, they're elegantly winging puppets (designed by Matthew McGee, who also creates puppet versions of the flying Greggs). But after Lucy's hocus-pocus, actors play the birds in costume, complete with quacking orange bills, bulging tummies and webbed, waddling feet. (Kendra Rai designed the costumes.)

When the ducks occupy the Gregg home (where guns are prominently mounted on the wall), comedy reigns: Among other diverting gags, Phillip Reid's Master Duck gets entangled in a jacket; Lauren Du Pree's Mrs. Duck gets her bill stuck in a cereal box; and Joe Brack's hilarious Mr. Duck festoons himself with toilet paper.

The drollery provides a brief diversion from the play's thought-provoking themes. Adaptor Wood (also the dramatist for "James and the Giant Peach") has given the "Magic Finger" script a more nuanced attitude toward hunting than Dahl's book displayed: Characters in the play point out that humans have long been carnivores, and that farmers such as the Greggs need to ward critters away from crops. (A scene in the play features a wheelbarrow containing dead rabbits, but these have, prudently, been designed to look like plush props, rather than real deceased bunnies.)

Still, adults who escort children to this show might need to talk through some serious issues. Is hunting for sport moral? How about killing animals for other reasons? Is there a hierarchy that puts humans at the summit of creation? Is it useful to get angry when you spot behavior that is wrong? (Imagination Stage suggests that the play is best for audiences ages 5 to 10.)

Lucy ultimately learns to process conflict through talk rather than sorcery. She doesn't give up her supernatural powers, though: Even after a teaching moment, magic might come in handy.

Wren is a freelance writer.

The Magic Finger

adapted by David Wood from Roald Dahl's book. Directed by Kathryn Chase Bryer; scenic design, Milagros Ponce de Leon; assistant lighting designer, Jedidiah Roe; sound design, Christopher Baine. About 90 minutes. Recommended as best for ages 5 to 10. Through June 2 at Imagination Stage, 4908 Auburn Ave., Bethesda. 301-280-1660
www.imaginationstage.org.