Harry Potter And The Cursed Child: The Skill Behind The “Stunt Show”

It is hard to find anyone who is unfamiliar Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, which premiered in 2016 at London’s Palace Theatre. Yet despite receiving five star reviews from The Telegraph, The Evening Standard and The Independent, ?(Beaumont-Thomas, 2016) there are still those who dismiss it as nothing but a visual effects “stunt show.” ?(Lawson, 2018) The question of whether we should regard a play that is part of a multi-billion pound franchise as serious theatre is undoubtedly contentious. However, according to the theatre makers, 60% of audiences who see the play have never before set foot in a theatre ?(Cbsnews.com, 2017)?. It is therefore the first entry point that many people have into the world of the stage and this, in my view, makes it worthy of further examination.

The play predominantly takes place 19 years after the main events of J.K. Rowling’s wildly successful Harry Potter books. Answering questions the army of fans have about Harry Potter’s later years was always going to be controversial. In making this play Rowling and Jack Thorne, the scriptwriter, have collapsed all the fan theories into one reality. As Roland Barthes would say, removing “that oblique” in which lies the reader’s imagination ?(Barthes, 1968).

Subsequently, it is no surprise that fan forums are full of angry readers refusing to accept the events in the play as canonical. Yet it is precisely this attempt to do service to the fans that lets the play down. A time travel plot element allows for familiar characters from the books to resurface in the production, with one such appearance drawing an audible gasp from the audience. These cameos can at times feel forced and time travel itself feels more at home in science fiction than in the wizarding world of Harry Potter.

Despite these small misgivings regarding the plot, the play undoubtedly shines in other ways. It features the beloved triumvirate of Harry, Ron and Hermione from the books, brought brilliantly to life by Jamie Ballard, Thomas Aldridge and Franc Ashman respectively. There is perhaps the feeling that these talented actors are not given enough to do, as the play focuses instead on their offspring. As such it is in the performances of the younger generation of actors where the play particularly shines. Joe Idris-Roberts as Albus brings a depth and relatability to the petulant character that does not exist on the page. Similarly, Jonathan Case finds both humour and pathos as the geeky Scorpius skirting dangerously close to but always avoiding parody.

With the script to the play being the best selling book of the decade ?(McFarland, 2019)?, the theatre makers seemed conscious of needing to create a real experience. The script itself does a good job of moving the action along efficiently, but seems designed to allow for the inclusion of a range of special effects and visual trickery. Jamie Harrison’s breathtaking illusions allow our witches and wizards to transform into other characters right before our eyes, disappear and reappear across the stage in the blink of an eye and at one point he even appears to fill the entire stage with water in a stunt that still has me confounded. There is also a custom written electronic score by Imogen Heap, that is about as far removed from the classical soundtrack of John Williams as it is possible to get. Alongside this at times beautiful score, we see the stunning choreography of Frantic Assembly veteran Steven Hoggett. Similarly there is incredible use of projection, particularly in the time travel scenes, characters fly out into the audience and

the theatre itself transforms into part of the scenery during one particularly dramatic moment. All these elements combine to make Harry Potter feel like an immersive theatre experience that must be seen and not simply read.

Given the inevitable hype around the play, the events surrounding the production are as key toanalysing The Cursed Child as the events on stage. Foremost among these was the #KeepTheSecrets campaign, which in the style of The Mousetrap before it, encouraged audiences to refrain from sharing plot points with their friends. Rather like Hitchcock's campaign for Psycho, this allowed audiences to be genuinely surprised by the story's twists and turns. It is clearly very effective as the gasps and excited whispering around the auditorium can attest. Equally noteworthy is the production's cast. Much has been made of the casting of a black actress, originally Noma Dumezweni, as Hermione. Whilst J.K. Rowling's tweet that "Hermione's race is never specified" ?(Rowling, 2015) ?is accurate, this does feel like a cynical attempt on her part to retroactively inject some much needed diversity into the books. However, on the part of the theatre makers, this diverse casting is inspired. Similarly, the casting of black actor Mark Theodore as Hagrid and The Sorting Hat and Asian actor James Phoon as Dean Thomas, help make the play feel more representative of England's cultural makeup. On the subject ofdiversity, the play does feel a little phallocentric with the female characters not given much to do. There is, however, the suggestion of an LGBT+ storyline between the two central male characters, though this is left very much up to the interpretation of the audience.

In conclusion, I enjoyed the play. The show moves along at a cracking pace, despite its almost six hour run time and John Tiffany's expert direction brings the slightly one-dimensional story brilliantly to life on the stage. The range of fantastic illusions, contemporary dance and wonderful performances make this show feel like a real theatre experience. With the play getting new generations interested in the theatre, the production promises to do the same thing for the stage that Rowling's novels did for literacy. The play has already opened in New York, London and Melbourne with additional productions scheduled for San Francisco and Hamburg later in the year. As such, Harry Potter and The Cursed Child will be seen and talked about for years still to come.

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