

Tom's Midnight Garden

IES Sat 11 December 2021

Introduction

Adapted from the children's fantasy novel by Philippa Pearce, David Wood's stage version brings to life the haunting story of Tom and Hatty, two lonely children who discover one another and become friends across different time zones. The story itself is relatively simple: young Tom is sent to stay with his aunt and uncle in their rather dull 1950s flat, to avoid catching measles from his younger brother. Rather bored and frustrated to begin with – it is not a place for children – Tom hears the large grandfather clock in the hall strike 13 one night, goes to investigate, and finds himself in a beautiful Victorian garden, populated by characters who do not appear to see him, apart from a young girl, Hetty. The two quickly become friends, and Tom discovers that time passes much more quickly in the garden - while he has spent hours and hours there, barely a few minutes have gone by in his aunt and uncle's flat. The mysterious key to it all seems to be the imposing grandfather clock, and strange old Mrs Bartholomew, who winds it religiously every day. The concept of staging two equally 'real' periods of time almost simultaneously is not a simple one. At midnight each night, Tom is able to venture back in time from the 1950s to the 1880/1890s, from a simple backyard with a few dustbins to a large Victorian garden with trees, crescent-shaped flowerbeds, lawn and greenhouse, from a basic hallway to an opulently furnished entrance hall. The first challenge therefore is to recreate both time periods so that each is as believable as the other in terms of detail. However sophisticated the available staging and techniques, the transitions should be made as smoothly as possible, so that they do not interfere with the telling of the heart-warming human story. It will be interesting to see how naturalistically/non-naturalistically the production team approaches the staging. Imaginative use of sound and lighting will doubtless play an important part, as will the use (or not) of props. The children in the Victorian era will need to age during the course of the play, and again it will be interesting to see whether you use any of the doubling up suggestions in the script.

Presentation

Set design & construction: On entering the auditorium, the main set was clearly visible, consisting of a simple small bedroom downstage right, defined by a tall brown painted flat and door, and furnished with simple bedstead and bedclothes left suitably awry by a young boy. Diametrically opposite, downstage left was a simple wooden chair, to be used by Peta, Tom's poorly sibling, and later replaced by two rather splendid regency chairs for Mrs Bartholomew's sitting room. Four square black wooden boxes were arranged upstage, one large and one small to either side of centre, to be turned round later with painted sides facing outwards, as part of the garden. Dominating it all was a large grandfather clock, angled to face inwards. This was the basic 1950s set, simple, and leaving much to the imagination. The Victorian garden, revealed when the upstage black curtains were drawn back, was, by contrast, colourful, with very brightly painted plywood (?) flowers and shrubs, a rather too perfect looking red wall on which the greenhouse was based, with small square panes of 'glass', and two simple brown painted wooden trees, one with a branch destined to snap in the storm (unfortunately the rope was clearly visible), and one against the back panorama, with an impression of leaves projected onto the screen. While a lot of thought had obviously gone into how to differentiate between the two main settings, the combination of actual wooden trees and projected leaves seemed a little incongruous. Apart from the enduring presence of the grandfather

clock, the other element shared between the two main sets/eras was the bedroom. On secretly visiting Hatty after her calamitous fall from the tree-house, Tom, passing 'through' the bedroom door (nicely devised, by the way, but possibly improved by a slight dimming of the lights) is amazed to discover that her bedroom is, in fact his own room, albeit much tidier, with a smart copper-coloured eiderdown adorning the bed.

Lighting: The lighting played a crucial part in defining each scene, and creating the atmosphere of each era, from the rather austere 1950s flat and hallway, to the bright Victorian garden and wintry skating scenes. The moonlight flooding in from the garden was nicely timed, although might have been even more effective had it started as a cold blue light, cross-fading to bright sunshine, as were the flashes of light during Hetty's fall and Tom's nightmare. There were a few moments when the actors stepped out of their light, or didn't make it in, and where the light appeared to come up in the wrong place, for instance on Tom's empty bed quite early on. On the whole, however, the lighting fulfilled its role of defining the two eras, and helping create the illusion of time and place.

Sound: Sound was mostly used to good effect, with cheerful snatches of music to denote the garden scenes, and more sinister notes to evoke a darker atmosphere. The sound of the ticking clock just before the lights went down to take us into the first and second acts worked well and was suitably atmospheric. The clock winding mime and sound were perfectly synchronised. Overall, I think the length and intensity of sound could have been increased, for instance in the geese-chasing scene and the thunderstorm, just to help reinforce the illusion. The falling tree and scream could have been dramatically louder. Similarly, there might have been a louder noise of breaking glass for the greenhouse incident, which might have helped the actors to react more. I liked the dog barking, although this would have been helped by more attentive miming from the actors. The clip-clopping of the horse and gig was subtle and perfectly realised. The snatch of echoing recorded Voices was great for the nightmare scene, and might have been used throughout to make them even more sinister.

Props: Props were fairly minimal and mainly used to good effect. The grandfather clock was suitably imposing, although it was not really possible to identify from the auditorium the small picture on the pendulum case from the auditorium, presumably of the angel referred to by Tom and Hatty. While many props were mimed or described, and left to our imagination, most noteworthy actual props were Hetty's beloved old doll, the 1950s style shopping baskets, although it might have been better if they had not been identical, and, of course, what appeared to be genuine antique ice-skates. Much in the way of props was depicted by mime from the actors, and effective to a greater or lesser degree. I particularly liked the gig, simply contrived by use of the black wooden boxes, which also became the 1950s dining room furniture.

Costumes: Costumes were particularly good, and in keeping with each era and character. Aunt Gwen's colourful full-skirted frock with its nipped in waistline, her elegant shoes, smart house-coat/dressing gown and pretty pink slippers were in keeping with a 1950s housewife, while Uncle Alan's flannel trousers and knitted waistcoat were appropriate for the time and character - his sock garters were a nice touch, complete with the shaving foam and manly dressing gown. Mrs Bartholomew's austere black, and smart grey cape when she ventured out were indicative of a dignified elderly widow, who retains a sense of adventure beyond plain convention. Tom's stripey pyjamas were appropriately boyish, as were the long shorts, white shirt and tank top. The costumes of Hatty's younger selves looked suitably Victorian; the boys with their breeches, white stockings, knitted waistcoats/short jackets and flat caps, and both young Hattys in their white pinafores and dresses. Older Hatty's beautiful long skating dress, fitted jacket and fur-trimmed hat gave just the right impression of her growing into a mature young woman, as did her elegant silky dressing gown.

Aunt Grace looked appropriately daunting in her black and the austere grey, tempered with a little white lace for the evening. I liked the way Abel's trouser legs were tied with string halfway down for working in the garden. The Voices looked suitably sinister with in their black cloaks and hoods which gave them height, although a glimpse of one red costume underneath slightly spoiled the effect. Hair styles were generally well realised, and Tom's boyish cut and glasses really helped the characterisation (although did you forget to don the glasses once towards the end of the play?) A pity about the falling hairpiece in Aunt Grace's bedroom scene – probably just needed more secure gripping, but well covered by Aunt G on her exit.

Stage management: There was relatively little in the way of obvious physical scene changes, barring the occasional moving of boxes and chairs, some of which was efficiently done by stage crew in black, and some by the actors. I wonder if Aunt Grace's 'dressing table' chair could have been brought on by James rather than she herself having to carry it on and off in her long dress.

Production:

The overall style was fairly minimalist and non-naturalistic in the dingy 1950s, becoming brighter and more naturalistic for the garden scenes, with a slightly incongruous combination of painted set and projected branches/leaves. Much of the story was told through narration by different characters, which could have worked well in creating the illusion of time and place, but didn't quite succeed, as the actors didn't seem to visualise what they were seeing and relating to each other and the audience. Mime was used fairly extensively, but again didn't always succeed in illustrating the various activities. For example, the piggy-in-the-middle game with Hatty needed a lot more jumping about and feigned missed catches of the mimed apple, Pincher the dog didn't appear to move about on his lead, and the intruding geese scene wasn't chaotic or noisy enough to have believably trashed the flowerbeds – there could have been a lot more frantic movement here, perhaps with geese chasing humans and humans chasing geese. The mimed skating scene didn't quite work as well as it could have done, had a little more attention been paid to actual skating movements. There was no impression of the skaters sliding and propelling themselves forward, maybe with the odd twirl here and there. The passing through the different eras could perhaps have been more vividly achieved if the actors had expressed more wonder, possibly moving more slowly between worlds. This is not to say that there should have been any gaps to halt the action. Unfortunately, even though most of the scene changes were implied by lighting and sound, there were some slightly uncomfortable pauses, possibly due to the odd costume change, which interrupted the overall pace of the play. The hooded Voices looked great, and appeared wonderfully sinister in their black. They also managed to maintain consistency in their choral speaking, which is not easy to achieve. However, their voices might have come across as more sinister by being recorded and amplified. The short section during Tom's nightmare in which the voices were loud and echoing was so much more powerful. Groupings were fairly well conceived, although the Ely Cathedral tower wasn't all that convincing. Perhaps the group could have been huddled closer together (at the risk of breaking Covid rules, of course!) The nightmare Angel scene nearly worked, although might have been more powerful had it been brought forward a bit into a bigger space, rather than being squashed into the upstage left corner. There were some lovely bits of business – Hatty's falling from the tree-house with the flashing lights and her flailing arms worked well; the horse and gig scene had just the right amount of small coordinated movement from all three actors, as they 'climbed' into the gig and drove off to the sound of faintly clip-clopping hooves; and the scene at the end between Tom and Mrs Bartholomew was sensitively portrayed, their palms finally touching, and with that lovely warm hug bringing the story to a close. In terms of casting, while all your actors looked individually convincing, there were

some fairly major age discrepancies which rather stretched one's belief. Aunt Gwen and Uncle Alan were quite obviously very different ages, and the ghastly Aunt Grace, similarly looked a little too old to be the mother of three young sons, as did Abel to be the sweetheart of Susan. That said, this is just a quibble, and I realise that it is not always possible to match characters in every way. The boy/girl swap for Tom and Peter/Peta didn't interfere with the storyline.

The Acting

A few general notes to start with. In a fantasy such as this, where much of the story is told through narration and characters describing what they are seeing, it is absolutely crucial for the actors to actually see in their mind's eye what they are describing. Otherwise the audience has no chance of sharing the vision and imagining what they are being told. Some of the young people in particular, while having enviably good memories for your lines, need to take much more time in their delivery, so that you can paint a picture of what you are seeing for your audience. You might feel as if you are speaking incredibly slowly, but that is often what it needs. Also, and this applies to everyone, be aware that your voice tends to be lost when you look down or turn sideways to the audience; hence you need to project, with much greater volume, and try to cheat your angle of vision forwards a bit, so that you are delivering the lines more out front. After all, your audience really wants to hear what you are telling us! Now on to a few individual comments (forgive me for not commenting on Laura, Billy and Ava, but unfortunately I was not able to see your performances).

Mrs Bartholomew (Clare Brett) – a rather strange, enigmatic character. You came across as mysterious and somewhat forbidding as you walked slowly forward in your black to wind the clock each day. It is not until nearly the end of the play that we learn the full story of a life tinged with sadness, but also wonderful happy times in her married years. Dignified as the ageing widow, you brought a lively sensitivity to the part, and your excitement as you remembered the happy times in the past was tangible. Your final scene with young Tom was particularly touching.

Tom (Josie Bulmer) – a huge part, which you carried off well, suspending our disbelief that you were not really a 10 year-old boy. The boyish hairstyle and glasses helped, of course, but your voice and mannerisms added to the characterisation. You managed to retain and deliver an enormous number of lines with confidence. Just remember that for the audience, this will be the first time they have heard those lines, so don't be afraid to slow them down a bit. You also need to visualise what you are speaking about, especially when you are excited, or describing a scene – "Wow", we really wanted to see that magical place!

Uncle Alan/Barty (Berry Bertshinger) – Uncle Alan is a straight, rather conventional middle-aged man of the 'fifties, and definitely stuck in his ways. He doesn't take kindly to the normal daily routine being disrupted by a somewhat grumpy, untidy young nephew, but is happy to explain such complex topics as time when any interest is shown. While a little too young for the part, you played him with a reasonable amount of confidence. You seemed to be more comfortable in the role of young Barty, politely shy, and eager to impress the beautiful Miss Hatty.

Aunt Gwen/Susan (Kate Livingstone) – Aunt Gwen is a conventional 1950s housewife, elegant and poised, with a pleasant manner, particularly towards her young nephew. You sense that, while she takes her duties as caring aunt very seriously indeed, she might be a little bit glad when it is time for Tom to depart and the household can return to normal. You looked lovely in the part, with suitable hairstyle and clothes. You were quite softly spoken, some of your lines being a bit lost, and could have done with more projection. I also wonder if you could have shown a bit more panic and sense of urgency when your charge had apparently gone missing from home. Susan the maid doesn't have

a lot to do apart from fetching and carrying, but you looked the part, and convincingly mimed drawing the curtains in Hatty's bedroom.

Peta/Hubert (Karmel Adaway) – an interesting role reversal as Tom's younger sister, you looked nice and snug in your lovely red dressing gown, and one could imagine you sitting up against the pillows, recovering from the measles. Reading Tom's letters out loud played a large part in bringing the story alive and was tricky to get right. Remember, you are painting a picture for the audience. Therefore we needed to see you really imagining the picture conjured up by his words. If you had taken a bit more time, delivering the words a little more slowly, and also looking up and out front a bit more, I think it would have helped. This is 'cheating your line of sight', so that the audience can hear every word you speak. Moving on to Hubert – he is not the pleasantest of boys, being particularly mean to poor Hetty, and this you managed to convey well. He must have been fun to play, and also it gave you the chance to act a bit with the others, as opposed to sitting in a lonely sick-bed.

Hatty (Lottie Wild) – poor Hatty has a rather sad and lonely childhood, having lost both her parents and growing up in a household where she is constantly teased by her boy cousins and berated by her nasty aunt, who seems to resent her very presence. She takes refuge in her own imaginary world and friendship with Abel the gardener, until Tom crosses over into her world and they become real friends. This was a large part, demanding much energy and pace, which you certainly brought to it. Just be careful not to lose words in your speed of delivery and excitement. We want to hear what you have to say, and we want to see the pictures you are seeing in your mind's eye. A confident performance.

Abel/Tower Guide (Phil Hunt) – Abel, the kindly old gardener with his strong religious convictions, is suspicious of Tom, whom he can see to some degree, is protective of young Hatty, and of course, his beloved garden which is constantly threatened by storms, wild geese and boisterous young boys. A smallish part, which you played convincingly, although I wonder if you could have shown a little more real anger and distress at the broken glass pane, and of course when Hatty falls from the tree-house. The tiny role of the Tower Guide you played well, and looked the part.

Aunt Grace (Claire Hart) – a rather nasty piece of work, Aunt Grace shows not an iota of sympathy for little orphan Hatty, indeed seems to resent her very presence and having to bring her up alongside her own precious sons. She is also irritated by the sympathy shown to her by James, her oldest son, as he grows up, and fears that he might even marry Hatty. You looked splendid in your rather severe Victorian costumes, and played her vindictive character to the full.

James/Angel (Finn Moran) – James is the kindest of her boy cousins, and the one most likely to stick up for Hatty. It is not easy being 'the nice one', nor growing up from one part of the play to another, but you managed to convince us of a slightly gangly youth becoming a pleasant young man. As the Angel of Tom's nightmare, you were scarily tall and angular.

Edgar/Small Hatty (Heidi Isaac) – you came across really well as Hatty's youngest cousin, a mischievous little chap with your hazel-switch and imaginary horse, copying your older brothers in teasing poor Hatty. Then you had to switch to playing Small Hatty, which you managed equally well, your little doll being your only comfort in an uncaring world, and was it you playing another naughty little child among the sightseers in the cathedral tower? Hope you're not being typecast - Well done anyway!

Older Hatty (Zuleika Driver) – A convincing performance of a more mature Hatty. Elegant and self-assured, you wore the silk dressing gown and Victorian long skirt with poise. You showed just the

right balance of maturity and the excitement of younger Hatty as she develops into a beautiful, spirited young woman and begins to fall in love with young Barty.

Voices (Zuleika Driver, Claire Hart, Phil Hunt, Finn Moran) – you looked wonderfully sinister and tall, all of you, in your hooded black cloaks. Choral speaking together is by no means easy, but you nailed it. Well done all.

Adjudicator's assessment: A performance of this enigmatic, charming story of childhood, friendship and the vagaries of time was not an easy choice for a pre-Christmas production. Whilst it can be done deceptively simply in terms of setting and props, it demands much of both actors and production team to bring it to life and create the illusion of reality. This was a good attempt, particularly over a short rehearsal period. Thank you for inviting me to come along and watch your performance, and apologies if I have missed anything or failed to credit anyone.

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