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'Esperanza Rising' combines beauty, harsh reality

BY RENEE VALOIS

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The gigantic roses plastered all over the yellow stucco walls of the set designed by Riccardo Hernandez for "Esperanza Rising" are a dead giveaway. Even a child can quickly grasp the metaphor of the young girl who blossoms in her homeland of Mexico and then is uprooted to eventually grow stronger in the new land of the United States.

But flowers aren't the only prominent metaphor in this world premiere from The Children's Theatre Company. Inscribed in huge letters at the top of the back wall is "Vuela Vuela Jilguerillo ~ Donde tu Puedes Volar" (Fly Fly Little Gold Finch ~ Where Ever You May Fly). There is also striking visual poetry in the glowing azure sky and giant shining moon that change hues with the emotions of the show.

But all is not bright and beautiful in Esperanza's world, although it starts that way. The show opens in 1930 on Esperanza's 12th birthday, and Erin Nicole Hampe convincingly portrays her excitement — as well as the spoiled nature of a wealthy landowner's daughter. She receives a spectacular doll that she refuses to let a lowly servant girl touch.

Pam Munoz Ryan's adaptation of Lynne Alvarez's award-winning book is compelling and colorful. The arc of the story is familiar: A rich and spoiled "princess" loses everything and changes for the better as she is forced to confront poverty. It is the details that make "Esperanza" unique.

After a series of surprisingly dark and tragic events, Esperanza is forced to flee with faithful servants to California. She lands in a migrant worker camp, and the show takes on even more adult themes. The question of justice, the risk of striking for greater pay, "Okies" from the Depression dustbowl of Oklahoma who desperately seek work, prejudicial treatment of minority workers, the fair distribution of wealth and the problem of sexual discrimination all get woven into the story.

Some of this will go right over the heads of younger children. But confronting the bleakness of a dirty tent where several are crammed into each cot and the inhabitants wear filthy, torn garments is bound to be eye opening for many. Sensitive children may find elements distressing.

Maeve Moynihan lightens the dark tone of the migrant camp scenes with her delightfully chipper

portrayal of outgoing Isabel, daughter of the family Esperanza bunks with in the camp.

A charming Mariachi trio intermittently comments on the action with hand-clapping songs that mark transitions. Director Rebecca Lynn Brown also highlights what has changed and what remains from Esperanza's privileged life in savvy scenes such as the dance at her birthday party echoed later by a festival dance at the migrant labor camp.

The clear message is that the potential for happiness does not disappear when wealth does. Neither does hope — which is what "Esperanza" means.

If you go

What: "Esperanza Rising"

Where: Children's Theatre Company, 2400 Third Avenue South, Minneapolis.

When: Through April 15

Tickets: \$13-34

Information: 612-874-0400, www.childrenstheatre.org

Capsule: "Good but sad" is how my daughter described it. I agree.