

A gorgeous 'Esperanza Rising' enjoys audience's rapt attention

Rohan Preston, Star Tribune
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The Tony Award-winning Children's Theatre Company is creating an impressive body of theatrical works for youth. On Friday, the company premiered "Esperanza Rising," adapted by playwright Lynne Alvarez from Pam Muñoz Ryan's best-selling children's book. It is a gorgeous production, staged with finesse by director Rebecca Brown, who has created memorable stylized scenes and evocative historic tableaux.

"Esperanza" is a story about the past that pushes into the present. In the 1930s, a well-to-do Mexican adolescent is cluelessly callous toward the hardships of the family's household help. When her landowner father dies, her life is upended. By law, her mother, Ramona (elegant Melanie Rey), cannot inherit property; the father's estate is willed to Esperanza's lusty uncle, Tito Luis (a gonzo Bob Davis), who wants to marry Ramona.

She declines. A fire, which may be suspicious, ravages her home. Esperanza travels several rungs

down in class, winding up in a U.S. migrant workers' camp.

Riccardo Hernandez' scenic design is breathtaking, including oversized rose petals. Matt Frey's magical lighting goes from the bright, beautiful family home in Mexico to the dim, dingy camp that becomes Esperanza's lot.

The acting is just as strong. Tireless Erin Nicole Hampe is so good as the snooty title character, she draws nearly as much pity as empathy when she falls.

She is nearly upstaged by young performer Maeve Moynihan, who plays Isabel, a little girl who befriends Esperanza in the migrant camp. Moynihan is so plucky and full of verve, she almost steals the show.

There are good turns also by Raul Ramos as Esperanza's father and as the man of the house (tent) at the migrant camp, Amanda Granger as a labor activist and Leif Jurgenson as the mailman.

What makes "Esperanza" most winning is that a story so susceptible to bathos is told without guile or artifice. What this little girl loses in privilege, she gains in empathy and experience. It's too bad she has to go through such ordeals, but all we have to do is go to the Children's Theatre and watch with rapt attention.

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'Esperanza Rising'

What: Adapted by Lynne Alvarez from the book by Pam Muñoz Ryan. Directed by Rebecca Brown.

When: 7 p.m. Wed.-Thu., 7:30 p.m. Fri., 11 a.m. & 7:30 p.m. Sat., 2 & 5 p.m. Sun. Ends April 15.

Where: Children's Theatre, 2400 3rd Av. S., Mpls.

Tickets: \$13-\$34. 612-874-0400 or www.childrenstheatre.org