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# Theater: Magical *Matilda* (And How to Make It Even Better)

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## ROALD DAHLS' MATILDA THE MUSICAL

\*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

### SHUBERT THEATRE

Being at a Broadway show on Opening Night is thrilling. But there's also something to be said about being at a Broadway show the day AFTER Opening Night. A scrappy show with mixed reviews has something to prove and the audience is right there with them -- hey, they already bought their tickets

and what do those critics know anyway? (Think *Les Miserables*.) And a great show with great reviews? The theater staff is smiling, the cast is walking on air and the audience is pleased as punch because they're attending what has suddenly and unquestionably become the hottest ticket in town.

That was the buzz at *Matilda* the day after it opened. The energy in the audience was palpable even before the show began. And no wonder: walk into the Schubert and the first glimpse of the set by Rob Howell (who also did the costumes) brings a huge grin to your face. It's composed entirely of large wooden, Scrabble-like tiles with letters on them. They arch over the stage and spill out towards the balcony. Seven swings hang down from the rafters, each one with a brightly lit tile that together spells Matilda. After a minute, everyone realizes words are hidden in the jumble of letters ("escapologist," "read" and other show-related phrases) and people spent the rest of the time before the show and during the intermission spotting new ones.

Those tiles continue as building blocks throughout the show: a column of them indicates the home of Matilda's family, a huge jumble of tiles and books make up the local library where she finds refuge and so on. Her father (Gabriel Ebert) keeps referring to Matilda as a boy and only

has time for her affably dim-witted brother Michael (Taylor Trensch). Her mother (the wonderfully named Lesli Margherita) resents Matilda because the child's birth prevented her from attending a ballroom competition with her dance instructor Rudolpho (Phillip Spaeth). And they're all horrified by Matilda's bizarre habit of preferring books over the television.

Matilda takes refuge at the local library where she proves to be much more than just a bookworm. Matilda is a certifiable genius and a five-year-old with a highly developed sense of outrage. Most little children would yell out "That's not fair!" when it's time to go to bed. But Matilda saves her outrage for real injustice, like her father's habit of cheating clients at his car dealership. Matilda is soon pulling pranks to take her dad down a notch (like putting glue on the inside of his hat so it sticks to his head). Her naughty side finds a much more formidable target when Matilda heads to school. First grade teacher Miss Honey (the Shirley Jones-like Lauren Ward) takes an immediate shine to this remarkable pupil. But the headmistress Miss Trunchbull (Bertie Carvell) most decidedly does not. She's a martinet who punishes students left and right, whether they're guilty or not of any infraction.

When the always hungry student Bruce filches a piece of Miss Trunchbull's personal chocolate cake, she goes on the warpath and soon has a student in her sights for a terrible fate. It isn't Bruce, who feels bad but is too afraid to 'fess up. But when he delivers an earth-shaking burp, a purplish cloud of burpy, chocolatey goodness floats around the stage until it hits Trunchbull and she realizes who the real culprit is. Bruce is suddenly facing an entire, massive chocolate cake and Trunchbull orders him to eat every single crumb. Remarkably, he does, to the cheers of all the students. Not to be cheated, Trunchbull then insists he'll be punished even more. "That's not fair!" shouts out Matilda at the end of Act One and the war is on.

*Matilda* is one of those exceptional shows where every element feels inspired. Led by director Matthew Warchus, it boasts exceptional work from top to bottom. The choreography by Peter

Darling, the sets and costumes by Howell, the lighting by Hugh Vanstone all work together wonderfully to put scenes over. Take "School Song," the musical number in which Matilda and the new kids are introduced to the scary world of Miss Trunchbull's school. It's performed by the excellent chorus, which plays everything from doting parents in one scene to older kids at the school in the next. The energy of adults dressed up as kids and goofing around is very fun. (Kudos to the casting of Jim Carnahan and Nora Brennan for their daunting task of fielding four kids for each lead child's role, a flock of little children in other parts and adults in countless other spots, all of them good.) When Matilda and her friends walk up to the gates, it's already a scary sight, with bars twisting this way and that in an off-kilter pattern that let's you know immediately this is no ordinary school. But then the inventiveness really takes off. The song by Tim Minchin starts playing off the letters of the alphabet from A to Z. Colored blocks of various sizes are shoved through the school gate into what you suddenly realize are slots. An "A" here, a "B" there and the actors clambering all over the gate while they warn the new kids about the horrors within dance, and sit, and climb up these blocks. "C" and "D" and "E" and "F" -- each line of the song introduces a new letter (sometimes in amusingly unexpected ways) and the choreography builds and builds and the blocks inserted in the fence create a ladder of sorts that the actors clamber up towards the top just as the song reaches its finale. It's a perfect blending of every element of a musical and riotous fun to boot.

Other wonderful touches abound. When Matilda is sent to her room as punishment (the awful child keeps *reading*), she rather plaintively and sweetly climbs up to the bookshelf above her bed and perches there while singing her song. At the beginning of the second act, Matilda's father comes out and makes a sort of public service announcement where he urges children not to imitate what they've been watching? The naughty pranks? The stealing of cake? No, the reading. Books are dangerous! Miss Trunchbull is famously strong (a former Olympian hammer thrower for the UK) and the sight of a little girl in pigtails throws her into a fury. (Actually, she's been stymied by Matilda from punishing a boy and looks for some other outlet for her anger.) In a clever illusion by Paul Kieve, Trunchbull grabs the little girl by the pigtails and starts swinging her around and around until she tosses her into the air. It's a wonderful bit of stagecraft made even more charming by the low-tech finale in which a dummy is dropped from the rafters and the real little girl pops up in the center aisle of the theater after being "caught" by some students. The audience knows exactly how it was done but applauds with delight because imagination trumps special effects every time.

As with the musical *Billy Elliot*, there's no "official" Matilda. Four young actresses rotate in the role. The night I attended the show, Matilda was played by Oona Laurence. It would be fascinating to see how the show subtly changes based on which child is performing. Lawrence was terrific in the acting scenes and solid in the singing; she holds the stage delightfully from beginning to end. However, she and the other American actors (a few key roles feature the performers who originated them in London) face the tricky task of performing with a British

accent. That's just fine in the speaking scenes but when they have to sing in a British accent, it becomes far more problematic. It didn't spoil the fun in the least, but I'd say a good third of the lyrics were indecipherable because of this.

The lyrics by Minchin were often clever and funny but the audience was pin-prick quiet as they struggled to actually understand what was being sung. So why have them sing and speak in a British accent? The story is quite universal and if you changed two or three words, the tale could easily be set in the U.S. (Change "headmistress" to "principal" and "Spain" to "Mexico," for example.) Or just leave every word as it is and not bother with accents. Putting that aside, I think the songs are not what people will leave the show remembering; they often blend together in a mid-tempo flurry of amusing word play and less memorable melody.

A few definitely stand out: Margherita and Spaeth have a blast with "Loud," a big dance number in which Matilda's mother puts down book-learning and says the less you know the louder you should shout it out. "Telly" is the Act Two opener celebrating television; it's an easy target to mock so doing it in a way that isn't obvious and tiresome is actually quite a challenge. As he does throughout the show, Ebert as Matilda's dad puts it over winningly. (Trench as the son Michael gets all the laughs on the number but I think it's a fairly foolproof part.) Matilda's big number "Quiet" didn't register with me at all though I loved the touch of having her literally raised up on a pillar of books. And Lauren Ward (who originated the role of Miss Honey) gets the closest to a really strong melody in the ballad "My House," which is spoiled somewhat by a busy arrangement that turns it into a duet with her late father.

Of course, I haven't even talked about the villain of the piece, Miss Trunchbull, played by the British actor Bertie Carvel. Sight unseen, I assumed it was a scenery chewing bit of drag in the tradition of panto shows, those holiday events in the UK where male actors don female costumes for a laugh, the audience hisses and boos at the villain and so on. That would have been fine and surely someone else down the road will do exactly that with the part. But Carvel delivers a remarkably subtle, effective turn, delivering his lines in a quietly menacing manner that is hilarious and frightening all at the same time. Whether he's placed in the lead or supporting actor category for the Tonys, I pity the actors running against him. They haven't a chance.

But above all -- above the excellent direction of Warchus, the cast brimming with talent, the superior tech elements up and down the line -- above all I must praise the book by Dennis Kelly which takes the rather one-note novel by Dahl and injects it with heart and warmth without ever sacrificing the ghoulish black humor that makes it appeal to kids throughout the years.

Kelly makes a string of smart choices, both large and small. That gigantic burp that betrays Bruce as the cake stealer? Kelly made that up. The modest backstory for the parents that gives

at least a modicum of understanding as to why they're so dismissive of Matilda? That's Kelly too; it doesn't "explain" them but at least it gives us something to hold onto other than the monstrous indifference Dahl offers. In the novel, when Matilda finds a second home at the local library and she's asked if her parents are proud of her remarkable brain (she's reading Tolstoy at five years old), she bluntly says no, they could care less. But in the musical, Kelly lets Matilda lie and say oh yes, they're very proud of her. In the book Matilda simply hates them. Here, she longs for parents who love her, which humanizes her much more. At the finale of the book, Matilda engineers her own happy ending. In the musical, Kelly allows both Miss Honey to grow in courage and lets Matilda have a moment of forgiveness for her dad. Nothing really changes as far as what happens, but it allows real emotion to infuse the story, rather than the bleak lack of nuance found in the original book. (Okay, I'm not a big fan of Dahl.)

Not every change is for the best. Kelly initially seemed to have made his smartest addition by turning Matilda into a storyteller. She regales the local librarian with a made-up story about an Escapologist and his wife the Acrobat. They have a sad, sad story where we finally discover that the Acrobat is pregnant but falls during her act, breaking every bone in her body and then dying in childbirth. Later the father either kills himself or is murdered. (Did I mention *Matilda* is probably not for the very young? Eight and up depending on your child's sensitivity seems right.) It's an involving cliffhanger told through words and at one point shadow puppetry. But it's also a story about parents who deeply love their child, a wonderful way to show both Matilda's imagination and her desire for parents that actually care for her. Knowing this was a new addition to the story not found in the book, I admired it immensely. However, then it gets a little confusing.

I haven't mentioned Matilda's psychic powers. (Her brain is so big that she is able to move objects, a skill that proves key in vanquishing Miss Trunchbull.) It turns out Matilda isn't just making this story up; she's rather miraculously retelling the backstory of Miss Honey. In the book, we discover that Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull are related when she tells Matilda that the woman may have killed her father and stolen her inheritance. That's not fair! Matilda then defeats Trunchbull. In the musical, this much more elaborate backstory involving the circus proves to be true, putting Matilda into *Carrie* territory. It's one psychic event too much. Plus, the revelation that the story Matilda was telling is actually the true story of Miss Honey and that the villain in both is Miss Trunchbull is jumbled up with the song "My House" and was very, very confusing. Everyone in the audience gets the gist of it (Trunchbull is bad!) but this should be clarified more.

Even better, drop the idea that Matilda has had some sort of vision of the truth. Let her fable remain just a story (and unintentionally revealing that she longs for love). Miss Honey can simply reveal that she's related to Miss Trunchbull and that the woman stole her legacy without all that psychic voodoo. This would have the added bonus of returning her big number "My House" into a solo turn.

Further, I was astonished that they didn't double up the roles of the Escapologist and the Acrobat with Matilda's father and mother. Clearly, the story telling shows how Matilda yearns for warmth and affection from her parents. That would be far more powerful and telling if the roles were played by the same two actors who play her folks.

Finally, a modest, but very unfortunate change involves the librarian Mrs. Phelps, played warmly by Karen Aldridge in a poor part. In the book, Mrs. Phelps is the first person to recognize Matilda's genius, guides her reading and wisely doesn't make a fuss over the child so the girl won't feel like a freak of nature. In the musical, Mrs. Phelps is now a Caribbean woman who is infantilized and acts like a dolt. She's desperate for Matilda to tell her stories (like the tale of the Escapologist) and becomes so wrapped up in the tale that she blurts out "Call the police!" in a moment of danger, incapable of telling the difference between reality and story time.

Even the staging here is wrong. Mrs. Phelps grabs two blocks for them to sit on, one big and one small. Matilda just takes the big one and Mrs. Phelps then meekly sits on the small one; the little girl stands on the big block and literally talks down to her. Why not return Mrs. Phelps to the intelligent, caring woman she was in the books? Let Matilda take the small block and then have Mrs. Phelps take the girl by the hand and place her on the big block and sweetly take the small one, showing the respect and admiration the little girl doesn't get at home. Mrs. Phelps can enjoy the stories and playfully be caught up in them without having to seem like a fool.

Drop the British accents so we can understand all the lyrics. Give Mrs. Phelps back her dignity. Let Matilda's story about the Escapologist be just a story and not a psychic vision. Have the actors playing her parents double up as the parents in that tale for an added emotional impact (and save a few bucks on a massive cast). And when they're doing a touring production, they might consider having all the schoolchildren other than Matilda, Lavender (her best friend!) and Bruce played by adults. The energy of adults playing and cavorting like kids is really fun here and this would allow the older kids to tower over them just as Trunchbull towers over them all.

But let's be clear: just as it is, *Matilda* is one of the brightest shows on Broadway and will be for years to come. It reveals theater talents in front and behind the scenes at the top of their game. You can tell a lot about a show from its curtain call. In this one, everyone comes out on a scooter and by and large they take bows in groups (such as the actors playing the husband and wife bowing together rather than each one bowing alone). It's playful, it's sweet and very clever. Just like the show.

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*My Children! My Africa!* \*\*\*  
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*Potted Potter* \*  
*Storefront Church* \*\* 1/2  
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*Requiem For A Lost Girl* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*Re-Animator The Musical* (NYMF) \*\*\*  
*Baby Case* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*How Deep Is The Ocean* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*Central Avenue Breakdown* (NYMF) \*\*\*  
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*Stand Tall: A Rock Musical* (NYMF) \* 1/2  
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*Bullet For Adolf* \*  
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*Harrison, TX* \*\*\*  
*Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck"* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2  
*Pink Milk* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2  
*Who Murdered Love* (FringeNYC) no stars  
*Storytime With Mr. Buttermen* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
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*An Interrogation Primer* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*

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*Golden Child* at Signature \*\* 1/2

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*Scandalous* \* 1/2

*Forever Dusty* \*\*

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*The Piano Lesson* at Signature \*\*\* 1/2  
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*The Sound Of Music* at Papermill \*\*\*  
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*Dead Accounts* \*\*  
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*Bare* \*\*  
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*The Great God Pan* \*\* 1/2  
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*Picnic* \* 1/2  
*Opus No. 7* \*\* 1/2  
*Deceit* \* 1/2  
*Life And Times Episodes 1-4* \*\*  
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*Blood Play* \*\* 1/2  
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*All In The Timing* \*\*\*  
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*Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery* \*\* 1/2  
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*Much Ado About Nothing* \*\*\*  
*Really Really* \*  
*Parsifal at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Madrid* \* 1/2  
*The Wild Bride at St. Ann's* \*\* 1/2  
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*Carousel* at Lincoln Center \*\*\*  
*The Revisionist* \*\*  
*Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella* \*\*\*  
*Rock Of Ages* \* 1/2  
*Ann* \*\* 1/2  
*Old Hats* \*\*\*  
*The Flick* \*\*\*

*Detroit '67* \*\* 1/2

*Howling Hilda* reading \* (Mary Testa \*\*\*)

*Hit The Wall* \*

*Breakfast At Tiffany's* \* 1/2

*The Mound Builders* at Signature \*

*Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike* \*\*\* 1/2

*Cirque Du Soleil's Totem* \*\*\*

*The Lying Lesson* \* 1/2

*Hands On A Hardbody* \*

*Kinky Boots* \*\*

*Matilda The Musical* \*\*\* 1/2

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**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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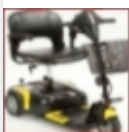
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