

# The children's hour with Oscar Wilde



By John Law, Niagara Falls Review  
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Sanjay Talwar as Remarkable Rocket and PJ Prudat as Dragonfly star in *Wilde Tales*, the lunchtime children's show which opened at the Shaw Festival's Court House Theatre Saturday. PHOTO: David Cooper / Shaw Festival

**WILDE TALES**, by Oscar Wilde. Adapted by Kate Hennig. Starring Sanjay Talwar, Kelly Wong and Emily Lukasik. Directed by Christine Brubaker. At the Court House Theatre until Oct. 7 \*\*\* (out of five)

Doing children's theatre at the Shaw Festival comes with a certain level of peril.

For one, a simplistic show pandering to kids would not – and should not – be tolerated here. The Shaw simply isn't the venue for fidgety kids expecting Toopy and Binoo or such.

On the other hand, you can't promise a show for kids and then serve them the standard Shaw fare, no matter how thankful mom and dad would be.

Finding that balance was the challenge for this season's lunchtime show, *Wilde Tales*. A collection of four Oscar Wilde short stories adapted for the stage by Kate Hennig, it has the formidable task of keeping kids engaged without the adults tuning out. It succeeds, though not without a pothole or two.

First off, there's the thrill of seeing something different by Wilde at Shaw, as the Festival has done all his major plays at this point. This one is based on *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, a collection of fairy tales he wrote in 1888 before all of his best known work. They are full of Christian metaphors of suffering and redemption, simple stories told with Wilde's piercing wit and occasional heartbreak. And as is the theme this year at Shaw, director Christine Baker gets the audience more involved, with children in the first row providing some sound and visual cues.

It makes for a charming and poignant 55 minutes, though not all of it clicks. And some of it may prove upsetting for very young audience members, as three of these stories end in a character's death.

*The Nightingale and the Rose* finds a bird offering to sacrifice itself so that a young suitor may obtain the red rose he needs to impress his beloved.

In *The Happy Prince*, a swallow who is late for his winter trek to Egypt befriends the statue of a late Prince who can't bear the sight of poverty in his village. To help requires a major sacrifice for both.

*The Selfish Giant* involves a grumpy titan who erects a wall to keep children out of his garden. It leads to a long winter, which doesn't end until children find a way to sneak back into his domain.

For Hennig's adaptation, these three stories are linked by *The Remarkable Rocket*, about an arrogant royal firework who fizzles during his big moment, and finds himself thrown away into a ditch where a frog, duck and dragonfly welcome him to his swampy new home. It offers the show's most delightful and funny performance by Sanjay Talwar as the proud rocket, who boasts "I'm sometimes so clever I don't understand a word I'm saying."

The stories are charming if a bit grim, and the religious overtones will likely elude young children (or possibly scare them). And there is simply no time – or opportunity – for Wilde's usual flourish of beautiful, piercing dialogue. Shaw's lunchtime shows are always quick hit affairs, and this one has to cram four stories into its time slot.

Still, there is worse (much worse) children's theatre you can be lured into. *Wilde Tales* may be light, but it isn't afraid of the dark.

[jlaw@postmedia.com](mailto:jlaw@postmedia.com)