

# Wilde Tales provides children's theatre that demands true engagement: review

The collection of Oscar Wilde stories being staged at the Shaw Festival makes for much more interesting theatrical fare than the Disney-fied versions that sometimes take up space in the “children's theatre” category.

[Carly Maga](#)



Sanjay Talwar as Remarkable Rocket and PJ Prudat as Dragonfly in Wilde Tales at the Shaw Festival. (David Cooper / Toronto Star) | [Order this photo](#)

# Wilde Tales

(out of 4)

Stories by Oscar Wilde, adapted by Kate Hennig. Directed by Christine Brubaker. Until Oct. 7 at the Court House Theatre, 26 Queen St., Niagara-on-the-Lake. [shawfest.com](http://shawfest.com) or 1-800-511-7429

## 3.5 stars

*Written by Oscar Wilde. Adapted by Kate Hennig. Directed by Christine Brubaker. Until Oct. 7 at the Court House Theatre, 26 Queen Street, Niagara-on-the-Lake. ShawFest.com or 905-468-2172.*

This year's hour-long lunchtime offering at the Shaw Festival, embraces two extremes: the innocence, joy, and sweetness of youth, and the inevitability of death, heartbreak, and decay. In Oscar Wilde's collection of children's stories, ones he wrote for his own children with his wife Constance Lloyd, they go hand-in-hand, as they did in Wilde's own life; known today for both his inexhaustible wit and romantic comedies as well as his imprisonment for homosexuality.

For Wilde, which is reflected in his stories, love is a powerful, life-altering force, one that isn't confined between a man and a woman (nor even between humans), and while it itself may be impermanent, its impact, however, is.

To be frank, it makes for much for interesting theatrical fare than the Disney-fied versions that sometimes take up space in the "children's theatre" category. That's why *Wilde Tales* also aspires to earn its subtitle, *Stories for Young and Old* — while stories like *The Happy Prince*, *The Nightingale and the Rose*, and *The Selfish Giant* present lessons about love and death that are sure to spark some family real talk on the drive home, they're welcome reminders for those of us who have experienced those lessons first-hand already.

In *The Happy Prince*, a sparrow (Kelly Wong) meets the golden statue of a prince (Marion Day), who weeps for the poor citizens in the town he overlooks. Though the sparrow yearns to travel the world, he stays with the Prince and, upon the Prince's requests, picks off his ornaments and delivers them to the poor, until the sparrow dies from the cold and the Prince's heart breaks. In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, a nightingale (Emily Lukasik) is so inspired by the love of a young student (Jonathan Tan) that she impales her own heart on a thorn to make a red rose bloom, so the student may give it to the object of his affection. And in *The Selfish Giant*, a mean giant (Wong) forbids children to play in his garden, which causes winter to last forever there. Once he lets children back in and lifts a small one up to play in the trees, spring returns, and he grows to love the small child, whom he never sees again until the end of his life.

The fourth story in the production, *The Remarkable Rocket*, is broken up into four parts woven in between the others, is more of a straightforward cautionary tale against ego and self-centredness, driven by the comedic performance of Sanjay Talwar as the titular rocket who finds himself thrown into the mud instead of lighting up the sky. And PJ Prudat acts as a sort of narrator, as the Moon.

Writer Kate Hennig (recently named the Shaw Festival's Associate Artistic Director), who adapted the stories for the stage, and director Christine Brubaker make sure these bittersweet stories wring the most out of their poetry. The cast are appropriately saccharine, to give heart and earnestness to the darkness, and Jennifer Goodman's Victorian picture book-inspired set and props add to the play's whimsical mood. But Hennig's added line, borrowed from Wilde's play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, points at the invention of *Wilde Tales* that keeps both its intended audience and its lightheartedness up front and centre (literally): "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

Around the edge of the stage (referred to as "the gutter" by the *Remarkable*

*Rocket*) sits the “Wilde Chorus” — a group of 6-12 year-olds who can sign up for a workshop an hour before the performance, who participate in the production with chants, songs, and props. Their enthusiasm and investment in the story — and the question as to how much of the darker aspects are hitting the young viewers — was sometimes as enjoyable to watch as the professional performers onstage, giving another option as to which “stars” we’re supposed to be looking at from the gutter. This aspect of participation and involvement from the audience fits in nicely with the mandate of the Shaw Festival’s new artistic director Tim Carroll, which he’s applying to several of the season’s productions. In the context of children’s theatre, it’s a tested and proven technique.

But in *Wilde Tales*, which presents a series of stories that asks for engagement with humanity and nature and selflessness in those relationships, the idea of children and actors working together is not only a learned lesson but an active one.