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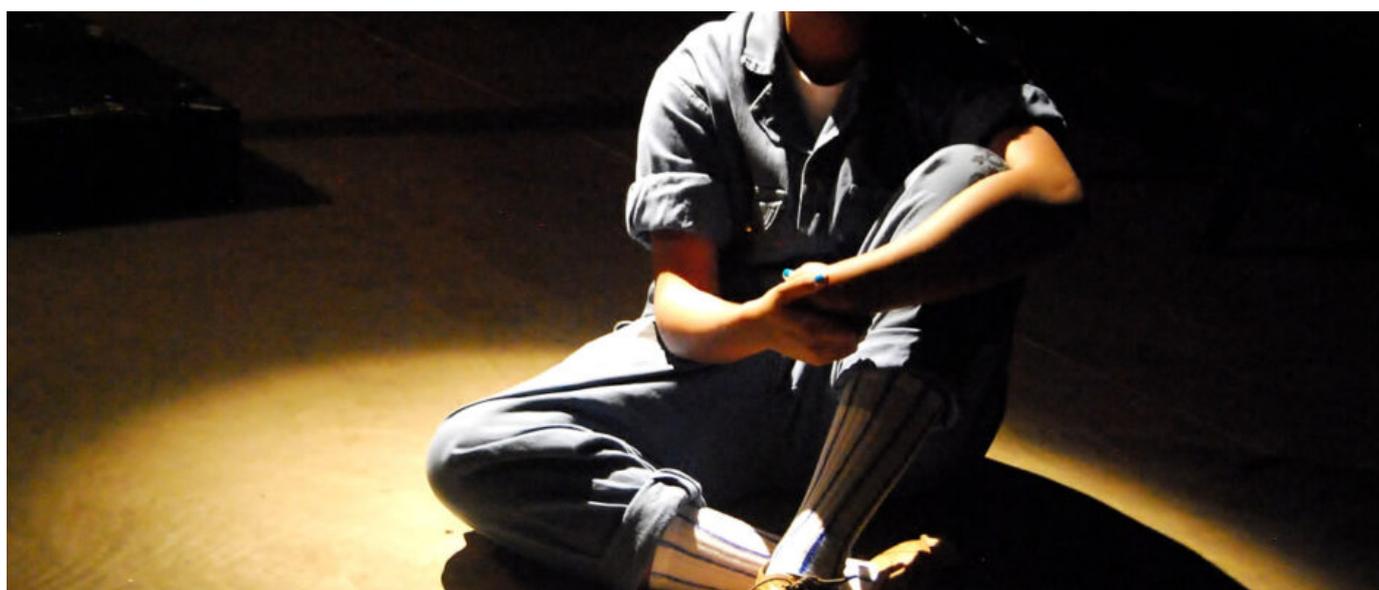
News Ticker

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The Little Prince (Arcola Theatre, London): Review

Posted on 12th May 2016 by JWaygood in Thing What I Saw // 0 Comments



Plane broken. Jonathan Scholey as The Pilot in 'The Little Prince'. Photograph: Courtesy of the Arcola Queer Collective



A sweeping, heartbreaking, and luscious reimagining, *The Little Prince* is a starry-eyed surprise from the Arcola Queer Collective.

A pilot has crashed in the desert. Whilst trying to fix his plane, he comes across a young prince who asks him to draw a picture of a sheep. He then learns of the Prince's home planet where he cares for three volcanoes and a rose, and then of their journey and the strange inhabitants of various asteroids that they've met on their way to earth. The Arcola Queer Collective returns with their acclaimed adaptation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's much loved *The Little Prince*.

Adaptation

I must confess that *The Little Prince* is not a children's book that I grew up with as a child. But given its ubiquity and saturation of it in popular culture, I was eventually introduced to the tale much later in life. Saint-Exupéry's children's novel has always been praised as being a children's book for adults, although widely regarded by both parties, due to the characters the little prince encounters being clear allegories on the absurdity of adult behaviour.

Hot off the gender-bending success of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it might seem a little odd that Nick Connaughton of the Arcola Queer

Collective has turned their attention next to the seminal children's novel: a very different kettle of fish compared to queering up Shakespeare. But, the buzz of the sell-out initial run (which I was devastated I couldn't make) proved that this was far from a risky punt.

You might initially think, "what's queer about *The Little Prince*, and what is there to queer up within it?". The thing is, that the fact that this adaptation is done by the Arcola Queer Collective is almost irrelevant. Apart from the gender-blind casting which results in some same-sex intimacy at points, Connaughton basically just does a version of the story for what it is and how they connect with it, rather than what may or may not be able to be inserted and twisted within. The result is a free, fluid, and vibrant version of the tale that couldn't care less if it was queer or straight-laced.

But, as I said, the fact that *The Little Prince* has been adapted by a queer collective is "almost" irrelevant. The relevance is that, although not a forced queer version *per se* in that it doesn't try to make campaigning or politically didactic points, Connaughton's queer eye across the tale is what makes this version of *The Little Prince* so potent and different. *The Little Prince* under Connaughton is exactly what I love about, and absolutely why I champion, LGBTQ theatre. The experience of those who create theatre and arts in this category will intrinsically draw from their life experiences, leaving a very distinctive mark on the end product. This creates an often uncanny point of view from this queer perspective, and when these interpretations and connections are exploited you end up with something once familiar becoming fresh and almost alien, provoking you to think and respond differently to any comfortable norm previously formed.

This is exactly what Connaughton's version of *The Little Prince* does. Love, dependency, and acceptance of fate become as strong themes in *The Little Prince* as Saint-Exupéry's original satire on adulthood. Because of this, there are plenty of moments that move you in a way that you probably never thought possible in *The Little Prince*, and suddenly Saint-Exupéry's fable becomes a living and emotionally dynamic piece. I never realised the story had such a potential to move me to a flood of tears, but the tragic element of the prince's plight, learnings, and misunderstandings, completely breaks you when you know where the story is heading, giving it an entirely new and deeply resonant perspective.

There are a few minor issues with the adaptation. Whilst it's great to see such diversity across the prince's role being split into three parts, it is a bit perplexing in that, apart from some playful takes on theatrical energy and interaction, you can't really see what doing so is ultimately trying to achieve over performing that part with a single actor. Furthermore, whilst it seems like there is definite potential for *The Little Prince* to be a children's or a family show, there are certain passages and approaches that might not be completely appropriate. Ultimately, it feels like *The Little Prince* is really aimed at adults who know and grew-up with the story rather than a something which can be introduced to younger family members. However, it is by no means outside the realms of possibility for this happen (unless you're super prudish), even if the maturity and timbre of the show is a little muddled at points.

Other than that, whilst *The Little Prince* has been turned into a heartbreaking adult piece, there is still plenty of exuberant and playful moments that keeps gives this cherished tale a fresh lease of youth and connection, causing an older audience to revisit and rethink *The Little Prince* in the most wonderful of ways. If you adore the book, you're going to fall head over heels with this adaptation.

Direction & Production

The production of *The Little Prince* might seem a little bare bones at first, apart from the wonderful use of myriad glitter balls of varying sizes to represent the stars and meteors in the story. But the best thing about its simplicity is that it leaves plenty of room for imagination to fill in the gaps: this is a children's tale after all. In saying that, Lydia Cawson's costumes really dress the production lavishly with queer little twists like the motives of variations on the theme of gender symbols, as well as giving the production a fantastical and punky feel. Everything from The Snake's suave attire to The Rose's drag-out-loud splendor is just sumptuous and visually arresting. Helping is Kirsty Gillmore's vibrant and colourful lighting that changes and sweeps the space with imaginative wonder, and sound design that adds an aural vividness. Rubyyy Jones' choreography and movement direction contributes too to how lively and ever-changing *The Little Prince* is.

Connaughton and Jones' direction ensures that the playful pace is kept up and the energy stays vibrant enough to prevent *The Little Prince* from becoming stale, with things like lavish cabaret moments. Connaughton and Jones put as much creative imagination into how the child-like energy is presented as the adaptation itself. The result is a wonderful piece of larger-than-life storytelling that is reminiscent of top-notch family shows, but with that dark adult touch that really brings out some of the hidden pathos in the tale.

Cast



Plane broken. Jonathan Scholey as The Pilot in 'The Little Prince'. Photograph: Courtesy of the Arcola Queer Collective



Everything's coming up roses. Arkem Mark Walton as The Flower in 'The Little Prince'. Photograph: Courtesy of Arcola Queer Collective.

The company for *The Little Prince* is made up of professional and first-time performers. But for as well as they all carry the production, it's very difficult to tell who are the newbies and who are the pros. All bring an enthusiasm, verve, and competence that moves the performances with the pace of Connaughton's script and theirs and Jones' direction. It's great to see such a mixed collective come in to its own and really put on a brilliant show.

Stand out performances include Damien Hughes role as The King (in some spectacular skin tight red sequin leggings) that is full of physical wit that brings out the absurd comic nature of a person trying to contrive a dominance over things they have no control over. It's a fizzing and fun turn for sure, and can't think of anyone other than Hughes, by way of Cawson, who manages to make laundry bags look, like their characters, so fabulous, regal, and outrageous!

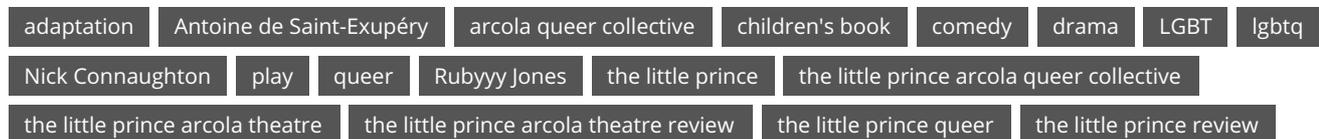
Arkem Mark Walton as The Flower is a fierce diva. As much as the *prima donna* attitude seems to come so easily, Walton somehow also manages to bring out and eek of dependency and vulnerability behind The Flower's flapping demands. Walton gives both an exuberant and complexly touching portrayal of a character that ironically unassumingly becomes the reason for the entire story, and thus is played with an intelligent and memorably gravity among the high-camp.

Vix Dillon as The Fox is also wonderfully carefree with a strange and wild sex appeal that is more playful and earnest than sordid or inappropriate. Dillon's unrestrained and bounding performance brings out a wonderful desperation, making it unexpectedly chime with those who long to be loved, and brings out a provocation about the sanctity of our relationships.

Verdict

Tuck yourself in for this exceptional take on the universal bedtime story. The Arcola Queer Collective's *The Little Prince* is more charming and far-reaching than you could have imagined.

The Little Prince plays at the Arcola Theatre, London, E8 3DL, until 14 May 2016. Tickets are £10 – £14 (concessions available). To book, visit www.arcolatheatre.com.



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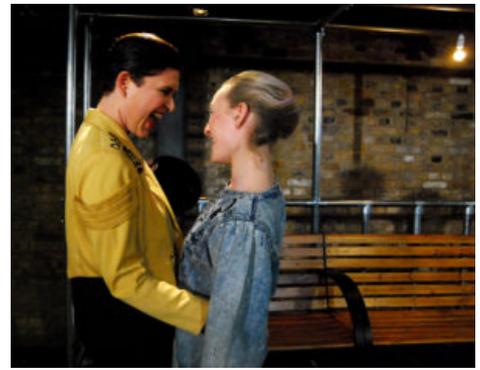
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Foxy business. Vix Dillon (left) and Lottie Vallis (right). Photograph: Courtesy of the Arcola Queer Collective.

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