



Theater review: 'Opal,' an impressive tale, but something's missing.

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Byline: Marcus Crowder

Apr. 30--There is so much to appreciate on stage and in the intent of the new Foothill Theatre Company world premiere production of "The Story of Opal." Even so, it's hard to fight a feeling that something is missing.

Director Lynne Collins' confident, unassuming staging gives "Opal" a welcome playful theatricality. Karyn Casl effortlessly presents the poetic savant title character -- an irrepressible 7-year-old girl in love with the world and everything in it. Casl's Opal takes us into her head with colorful, rhythmic language that is naive, pure and partly made up. Opal intuitively communes with the natural world around her, the trees, dogs, crows, pigs, and clouds in ways which suggest Ralph Waldo Emerson or poet Gary Snyder.

Yet what we don't get from playwright Gale Fury Childs' exploration of Opal's world is a certain context for the character. Childs' play derives from the journal of the actual Opal Whiteley. Make that the controversial and often debunked journal of the actual Opal Whiteley. Whiteley produced the journal when she was 22 years old, claiming to have written it in crayon on scraps of paper given her when she was 6 and 7 while living in a rural Oregon logging town at the turn of the 20th century.

At first a literary sensation, the authenticity of the work was quickly called into question and "The Journal of an Understanding Heart" is often considered an elaborate, though unquestionably effective, hoax.

The writings and the play portray a very special, sensitive young girl who seems very much apart from the other people living in Cottage Grove, Ore. Opal walks and talks with the animals and plants around her naming them as she goes. Her stories are a series of incidents

and observations as she takes her pig Peter Paul Rubens to school, reads to her horse William Shakespeare, and goes exploring the woods with her dog Brave Horatius and wood rat Thomas Chatterton Jupiter Zeus. Opal also claimed to be a kidnapped French princess and ultimately died in an English sanitarium.

None of Opal's backstory makes it on stage; Childs abruptly plunges us into Opal's wonderfully eccentric world. While initially charming, Fury's rather flat play needs the dynamics of Whiteley's life story to give the repetitive vignettes some narrative drive. The first act is overly long and easily could be compressed, with the more compelling action taking place in the play's second half. It also feels disingenuous to simply dramatize Opal's journal without explanation. Yet the work is effective and moving in its subtle open-hearted presentations of world's often unremarked-on wonders.

An ensemble including Shaun Carroll, Carolyn Howarth, Michael Stevenson and Sharon Winegar portray the numerous characters of Opal's world. Whether they are trees or dogs or kindly adults, the actors carry a joy reflecting Opal's immense vitality.

Composer **Michael Rasbury** has written an evocative, essential score for the work, and lighting designer Les Solomon and set designer Pamela Hodges take us into the imagination of Opal. Paulette Sand-Gilbert's costumes also contribute to the production's rich palette.

This world premiere by FTC has a rich spirit reflecting the play's title character and the glowing sensibility overshadows the questions of the journal's authenticity.

Opal's thoughts after getting switched by "the mamma" sum up her philosophy and the play's vision:

"The back part of me feels a bit sore, but I am happy, listening to the twilight music of God's good world. I'm real glad I'm alive."

The Story of Opal 3 and 1/2 stars

What: Foothill Theater Company production

Where: Nevada Theatre, 401 Broad Street, Nevada City.

When: 7 p.m. Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, and 2 p.m. Sundays through May 27.

Cost: \$11 to \$24

Time: 2 hours and 15 minutes, including intermission

Information: (530) 265- 8587, (888) 730-8587 or
boxoffice@foothilltheatre.org

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