

## Burg: Imagine U's 'James and the Giant Peach' what theater for young audiences should be

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### A&E

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I have seen far more theater in four years on this campus than I'd care to admit. Northwestern puts on an obscene number of productions — both department- and student-run — each year, all of my roommates have been involved in at least one show and I've always been partial to a good musical. It's the perfect storm. It would've been impossible for me to have graduated unscathed, never experiencing the splendor that is the Dolphin Show.

But let me tell you, I've never been more impressed with productions on this campus than when I've gotten the chance to see theater geared toward children, often referred to as "TYA," or Theatre for Young Audiences. The Theatre and Interpretation Center's production of "The Little Prince" in the spring of 2012 was a magical, mind-blowing theatrical experience only made more so by the addition of circus elements, with the help of the Actors Gymnasium. I was enchanted, much like the young people sitting around me, mouths open in amazement.

"James and the Giant Peach," presented through Imagine U in the Musseter-Struble Theater from Feb. 13 to March 1, is similarly enchanting, engaging and, on the surface, for children. Based on Roald Dahl's classic children's story, the musical features a score by Tony award winning team Benj Pasek and Justin Paul and a book by Timothy Allen McDonald.

Directed with a playful touch by Communication Prof. Rives Collins, this production is simply delightful. The characters come to sparkling life, impressively so, seeing that they're confined to the minuscule space of the Struble black-box theater. It's difficult to single out an aspect as the most well done — everything is executed perfectly, from the whimsical choreography to the beautiful shadow play accomplished with umbrellas and flashlights. The music, an eclectic mix of styles that includes both a tango and a jazzy blues number, is provided by a single piano player stationed onstage who I immediately forgot was there, as I was steadily drawn deeper into the magic of the show itself.

Adorable insect puppets, miniature dioramas, an inventive "giant peach" made of umbrellas and witty costumes coalesce into a visually stimulating hour and 15 minutes. Several aspects lend a meta quality to the proceedings: The character of the narrator, performed jubilantly by Communication junior Myrna Conn, continually addresses the audience, while stagehands in bowler hats interact with the cast members and appear amidst the action in smoothly choreographed sequences. It is a visually and musically rich show, with intricate staging countering the minimal set. The audience is swept up in the aesthetics, but what holds them rapt is the charm of the performances.

I don't think I've ever seen a cast appear to have more fun than the cast of "James and the Giant Peach." The enthusiasm of the actors for the material shines through the characters, adding a dimension to the portrayal of fantastical figures that is perfect for creating the whimsical world of Roald Dahl. Theater for young audiences in particular affords an actor the opportunity to really enjoy herself, something that can be rare in a world of serious actors being serious.

Hilarity is the order of the day for James, and the exuberance of the cast is matched only by the wonder engendered by the striking visuals of the production. I love a good "Titanic" or "Cabaret," but it's unbelievably refreshing to experience theater performed with such obvious enjoyment by those involved, and in such a professional manner.

Audiences agree: Every one of last week's performances was sold out, and this weekend's shows are already beginning to fill up. Children, adults and NU students are flocking to the Struble.

"James and the Giant Peach" is exciting because it's what theater for young people should be, that is, children's stories brought to life on stage so well that adults want to experience it. And it's also a great outlet for actors to have fun. When the actors have fun, the audience has fun. It's good for everyone involved.

People love TYA — let's have more of it.

**Email:** [madelineburg2015@u.northwestern.edu](mailto:madelineburg2015@u.northwestern.edu)

**Twitter:** [@madelineburg](https://twitter.com/madelineburg)