



Review: Dramsoc's 'His Dark Materials Part 1'

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'Ambition' is the word which underpins Bristol Dramsoc's bold adaptation of Philip Pullman's well-loved children's trilogy. Housed in the Union's brand new Winston Theatre, complete with a live band and a packed out audience comprising the most striking ratio of students to non-students I have ever seen, anticipation is palpable in the air. Does the 32-person cast, puppets borrowed from the National Theatre itself and director Max Kirk's promise that 'you'll marvel at the spectacle' live up to expectations? I am pleased to say they do.

Following protagonist Lyra Belacqua on her toilsome journey through parallel universes, we see compasses, spyglasses and knives at work in this first instalment of Nicholas Wright's play version of the original text. With all the fantastical elements of a world dreamt up by the whimsy of a child's imagination, yet coupled with the philosophical complexity which harks back to Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Pullman's own devout atheism, we are met with a sensitive and thrilling portrayal.

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The play is imbued with a professionalism rarely seen within amateur drama. Slick down to the last delicate drape of a witch's dress and rumbling resonance of a polar bear's growl, characters weave their

way around the stage with expertise. The cast are skilfully selected and give stellar performances: one cannot imagine anyone else befitting the role of Lyra so well as Robyn Wilson, and Alice Kirk's chilling Marisa Coulter is rendered seamlessly with poise and grace. 'The church', a unifying force opposing the scientific progression at the heart of the play, is portrayed with all the imposing darkness expected from the writer who described his books as being about 'killing God'. Actors handling puppets are similarly evocative, injecting life into the character's daemons through their use of voice, movement and reaction.

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Having neither read nor seen other adaptations of the story before, my only qualm is the broad and sometimes confusing nature of the tale; its complexity is at first overwhelming and one is sceptical about suspending disbelief. However, this is not a fault of the production and remedies itself in the second half of the play. The introduction of a second Will Parry, Lyra's best friend in an alternate universe, anchors us in our own reality and the world we can recognise; perhaps it is this measure of realism which fantasy relies on. With building tension and puzzle pieces half coming together towards its culmination, the second half of this instalment ends with a bang.

Although Dramsoc purport that these plays can be seen in isolation, I do not feel assuaged by this mere portion of delight and am already itching to see the second part of *His Dark Materials*. Rarely is a production of this calibre devised at the hands of students. For weeks, a buzz has been building around this magnanimous show — and you should do anything you can to get your hands on a ticket.

Stars: ****

[Click here to read the review for 'His Dark Materials Part 2'](#)

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