

HIS DARK MATERIALS PART 2

Bristol Dramsoc

Review: 'His Dark Materials Part 2'

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A war against heaven, the fall of Man, and two twelve year olds whose success or failure will determine the collective fate of humankind – DramSoc set themselves a Herculean task in staging Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. And yet Part 2, which opened last night at the Winston Theatre, delivers a majestic and poignant climax of a story reductively summarised as '*Paradise Lost* for children and atheists'.

Just as Milton talks about the transformative potentials of space in that long poem, the production does wonders with a few boxes, platforms, and ladders. Lyra (Robyn Wilson) and Will (Tom Grant) journey on through arctic caves and underworld lakes, coming across witches, armoured bears, and scariest of all, the Roman Catholic Church along the way.

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The imaginative scope of the narrative is thrilling, and DramSoc's adaptation for the theatre is just as impressive. There isn't a bad performance in the production, and the cast exhibit a versatility which a story with so many characters and settings demands of them.

Lord Asriel (Josh Vallance), Pullman's brooding reincarnation of Satan, constantly asserts his desire to 'smash the universe into a million pieces and put it together in a new way'. He displays a Nietzschean will to power which at once horrifies and inspires, drawing the audience's unanimous support against the Church's divine despotism well before the interval.

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Another highlight was Harry Trevaldwyn, first as a loathsome spy of the Church, Lord Boreal, and then as Balthamos, a rebelling angel set on God's downfall. Whether playing an agent or an adversary of Heaven, Trevaldwyn glides round the stage with ease, evidently comfortable performing in either a comic or dramatic capacity. The angel puppets, essential human upperbodies fashioned out of white fabric, are subtle; though I could not stop seeing the Michelin Man whenever they appeared on stage.

Puppetry is, in fact, one of the greatest joys of this production. Every dæmon, as well as being beautifully crafted, is brought to life with such vividness and skill that it is near impossible to resist investing in them. Admittedly, I struggled to hold back repressed childhood anguish at not having my own Pantalaimon, but it was thrilling enough to watch Joe O'Toole manoeuvre the ermine about on stage for over two hours.

Yet one does not need any childhood affinity with the books to appreciate the spectacle of DramSoc's latest production. *His Dark Materials* at the Winston Theatre is a masterful display of performance, narrative, and sheer emotional lucidity.

Stars: *****

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