

Stage Stuff

Posted on Mar 30, Posted by [Lois Lowry](#) Category [Uncategorized](#)

THE GIVER has just had a new and wonderfully successful incarnation on the stage in Portland, Oregon.

The adaptation used there, and beautifully staged by Oregon Children's Theater director Stan Foote, was written by Eric Coble. And in May, in Pittsburgh, the Prime Stage Co. will present a different adaptation of the same book: this one by Diana Basmajian. Reading both scripts...(and at the same time reading the screenplay)...was fascinating, since each writer approaches the material differently..and of course translating a book to a more visual medium is a unique challenge.

Here's a review of the performance in Oregon. Pittsburgh's, of course, is still to come.

THE OREGONIAN
Friday, March 10, 2006

-- Michael McGregor

"THE GIVER": At a time when America seems obsessed with being safe, perhaps the best thing I can say about Oregon Children's Theatre's exceptional stage version of Lois Lowry's popular dystopian children's book "The Giver" is that it isn't safe at all.

OCT Artistic Director Stan Foote took a big risk when he asked playwright Eric Coble to adapt a book some have criticized for its dark vision of a future where "Elders" dictate everything, including death, and "sameness" is the highest good. He upped the ante when he booked huge

Keller Auditorium while warning that the play might not be suitable for children under 10 (a large part of OCT's regular audience).

The happy result is an absorbing production that asks both children and adults compelling questions about how we want our world to be.

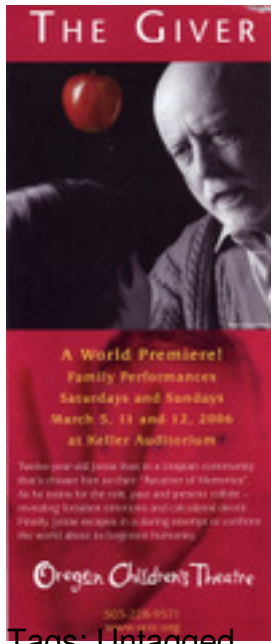
□ *Coble's script stays close to Lowry's book, which means it sets us down in a society where everything is carefully managed -- where rules determine even family interactions, pills take care of adolescent "stirrings," and children receive lifelong roles when they turn 12.*

In this brave new world, the only color people see is gray. On the Keller stage, the grayness comes from everything -- costumes, props and giant monolithic slabs that rumble like great prison gates each time the setting shifts.

The play's protagonist is Jonas, a 12-year-old assigned a special role: to be the community's next Receiver of Memory. In a book-filled room, he meets with The Giver, who, like him, was chosen in his youth to be the repository of unsettling memories the community has chosen to forget: war and fear, but also sunshine, snow, the love of grandparents, and color.

As his eyes are opened to what's missing from his world, Jonas learns controlled perfection's awful cost and, with The Giver's help, rebels. Ryan Stathos (left in photo) plays Jonas with an appealing mix of apple-cheeked innocence and earnest integrity, and Steve Smith (right in photo) is a weary, loving presence as The Giver, who, with one touch of his hand, bestows the joy of a sled ride or the horror of a battlefield. The rest of the cast is strong, too, especially Andres Alcala as Jonas's eerily unflappable father. And Peter West's lighting and Mark LaPierre's sound evoke the transferred memories vividly.

The playbill includes "Family Discussion Questions" to foster conversation about the play's important subjects, but this production is provocative enough to raise those questions on its own.



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