

and apparently affluent family support her through a year of discarding these activities until she finally discovers the tuba. Personally, before the "happy ending," I was ready to punch her piggy little nose.

---

*Sandy Odegard is a former English teacher now concentrating on writing and grandmothering.*

## Other Media / Autres médias



Photo Credit: Cyla von Tiedemann

*From the Young Peoples Theatre production of Anne, with Jennie Raymond as Anne Shirley and Jamie Robinson as Gilbert Blythe*

### A New "Anne" on the YPT Stage

**Anne.** L.M. Montgomery. Adapted by Paul Ledoux from the novel *Anne of Green Gables*. Young Peoples Theatre presentation. Director Patricia Vanstone. Set and Costumers Sue LePage. Lighting Steven Hawkins. Composer Ian Tamblyn.

Perhaps the most telling compliment to YPT's recent (newly adapted!) production of *Anne of Green Gables* is this: it isn't disappointing. The Anne story is beyond familiar to many Canadians — it is something we have internalized to the point of pseudo-ownership. Commissioning and producing a new adaptation of the story can be considered a courageous undertaking. Toronto's Young Peoples Theatre and playwright Paul Ledoux have bravely initiated this project and effectively reworked L.M. Montgomery's famous novel, demonstrating discernment in downsizing a text of somewhat daunt-

ing size and descriptive fullness by choosing appropriate characters and events to highlight. The events, relationships and spirit of the original book are conveyed comfortably, satisfying longtime fans and welcoming new ones. The study guide claims the play is more child-centric than the original novel, but “community-centric” would be more representative of the atmosphere of this production. Together, script, set, direction and acting exude a warm sense of close community, home and belonging, perhaps even warmer than that which existed within L.M. Montgomery’s vision.

From the beginning of the play, the audience is drawn in as members of the Green Gables community. Ledoux’s choice to use the flashback convention as a structure from which to tell Anne’s story makes this possible. We begin with Anne at sixteen, an Anne who has won the Avery scholarship and is meeting Matthew and Marilla at the train station, reminiscing about her first arrival to the same station. As the play continues and we are taken back and forth between long flashbacks to Anne’s arrival, acceptance and adaptation to Green Gables (or its adaptation to her!) and the shorter “present-day” scenes in the well-cushioned sitting room, the sense of familiarity and camaraderie within the latter space is inclusive, enveloping an audience ready and willing to reminisce along with the characters.

Much of the strength in focus and flow of the play may lie in the effective manipulation of necessary cut-paste-and-condense decisions, so that they reflect and empower the main vision and thematic backbone of this adaptation. The cast is small, making the events and relationships more focused and easily digestible, especially for those of the audience who are newer to the story. Harron and Campbell’s well-known musical may have needed a large cast for choral singing purposes, but this intimate stage play works well with its eight characters. Beside Anne, Ledoux chose from the original text four child characters: Diana Barry, Josie Pye, Ruby Gillis and (of course!) Gilbert Blythe, and three adult characters: Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert and Rachel Lynde. Limited as this representation of the Avonlea population may seem, it allows individual characters and the relationships between them to be explored and developed in detail.

Another practical decision which (perhaps surprisingly) strengthens the close sense of community is this: school does not fill a large role in this adaptation. The children talk about happenings from school, and sit on benches to represent a school space on Anne’s first day — the day of the notorious slate-breaking incident. However, there is no defined schoolroom in the set, no teacher in the cast and an almost complete absence of schoolroom/yard scenes. Interestingly, this was not disruptive to my perception of Anne’s world, nor did it seem particularly untrue to L.M. Montgomery’s creation. By minimizing the school theme, an atmosphere of “home” is more pronounced. An absence of excluding walls emboldens the vision: the set is comprised almost totally of home space. Stage right is filled with the designer’s physical interpretation of Green Gables: a kitchen, sitting room, and more formal parlour all form a somewhat integrated chain, while Anne resides in her little room upstairs. Stage left is a more malleable space: it easily becomes the Avonlea store, Rachel Lynde’s porch or the Barry’s home,

and centre stage is multi-levelled and tree-lined, used as a general travelling, meeting and playing space. The entire set seems connected; lines flow and objects are close enough to appear interdependent, but without cultivating claustrophobia. Introducing a school into the set and a teacher into the cast could have scattered the focus and intensity of the family circle.

By drawing out and illuminating themes of home, belonging and community, this production gains its tightness and main theme, but also forfeits some of the psychological and emotional depth of L.M. Montgomery's character development. The YPT production loses much of Anne's initial fear of rejection and the sometimes disapproving, cool emotional climate fostered by Marilla, Rachel Lynde and others in Avonlea in response to Anne's often ridiculous antics and overall outlandishness. The original novel and the famous movie starring Megan Follows both begin in a shroud of loneliness, lit waveringly by the small flicker of hope in the eyes of Anne with an "e". This play begins with a warm sunrise, created in an impressive display of layered lighting cues. The sound of a train whistle and the aural collage of Solitudes-esque music blending into familiar voices signifies the gathering of a close-knit community to welcome Anne home. We thus begin with an understanding of Anne as an accepted and loved part of this "family," instead of hoping for and eventually realizing that outcome. The difference is also noticeable in the portrayal of the characters and their interactions. Anne is absorbed into friendships and families without the hesitation or reservations which often accompanied others' perceptions of her in Montgomery's story. Marilla does not undergo the typical character metamorphosis; she is soft and pliable from the start. Rachel Lynde is also much more understanding and of good humour than I remember her in Anne's first days at Green Gables. The playwright and director have clearly chosen to wholeheartedly present an Anne who belongs and is loved, and although their community-centred flashback convention appeals to an audience who knows Anne *will* be embraced, we lose much of the potential for vulnerability and transformation which lies in Anne's desperate need for acceptance, and Marilla's struggle to demonstrate love.

An oversight in attention to detail was obvious in the designing of Anne's room. The rest of the set is life-size, but neither Anne's room nor bed are made to scale. Her "room" is simply a square flat raised above the rest of the Green Gables house, and her "bed" is a small box with a quilt thrown over it. Young audience members pointed out the incongruity of this during the after-show question and answer period, and were met with the explanation that a fully equipped room and actual bed would not fit in the space available, and that the box is meant to be representative of a bed. Realistic as this may be, the box-bed is still an eyesore, disturbing the visual consistency of an otherwise well crafted set.

The acting was marked by intensity, interdependence and a good sense of rhythm. Jennie Raymond's Anne seemed to bellow her way through the play, though not entirely unpleasantly. She was consistent in energy and charm, and was able to play Anne's sometimes melodramatic personality to an outrageous level without becoming melodramatic herself. Catherine Catatos's Diana was sweet, but very nearly sickeningly so: her wide, wide

eyed adoration of Anne bordered on irritating, especially because she lacked significant character substance of her own. One bonus: her over-the-top cuteness made the “raspberry cordial” scene (Diana accidentally becomes intoxicated) particularly funny. Sweetness and cuteness were also a bit overdone when the children acted together as a team during scene changes. They waved flowery branches in the air, skipped and played nice little games to the sound of their own voices singing, giggling and laughing incessantly over the speakers. Jerry Franken’s Matthew Cuthbert appeared to have difficulty maintaining a low energy level — he struggled to convey sufficient stage presence in a typically quiet character, and was therefore often more energetic than Matthew ought to be, and less of a contrast in personality to Anne and his sister Marilla.

Any over-zealousness in energy may have been at least partly contextual: the audience of Toronto-area school classes was obnoxious and impatient, clearly a generation raised in cinemas, not live theatre. The cast pulled out all the stops in a valiant effort at hooking the dangerously fickle attention of their young audience, but any scenes lacking in non-stop action were greeted with copious amounts of whispering, talking, seat creaking and general noise making. The plea in YPT’s study guide for teachers to prepare their classes to be respectful audiences seemed to have been totally passed by. From my perspective in the side balcony, the antics and social rituals of the audience were often more fascinating than the action on stage. This may have been due largely to disrespect and cultural ignorance on the part of the audience, but also it challenges the relevance of *Anne* to urban ‘90s kids. I believe that Anne’s experience of rejection and acceptance, her desire for true community, her incorrigible spirit and her delightful disruption of “proper” behaviour and insincere society is very relevant to this population. However, the response of the audience brings into question the success of YPT’s attempt to share this story in this time. “Bosom buddies,” kisses as greetings and friendly hand-clasping were all very much beyond the comprehension of an audience striving to be tough and cool, and were met with guffaws and exclamations of “nasty!” Some scenes were immensely well received, though, namely Anne’s fiery confrontation with Rachel Lynde and subsequent apology, and Josie Pye’s outraged jealousy over Gilbert’s fascination with the spirited redhead. Despite their ‘90s cynicism, the audience seemed to leave the theatre relatively entertained, satisfied and Montgomery-literate. Overall, *Anne* succeeded at the difficult task of telling the story of a passionately loved heroine, and while the scripting and directorial choices made may have eliminated some of Montgomery’s dramatic potential, the production was characterized by enthusiasm, interdependence and the warmth of caring community.

---

---

*Leanne Wild graduated from the University of Guelph with an Honours BA in drama in June, 1997. She has worked, played and read with children of all ages in diverse capacities and spaces, including camps, schools, community groups and churches in Canada, the USA and Brazil.*