

WEEKEND



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The who, the which and the whatsit of a tricky adaptation

Making 'A Wrinkle in Time' a musical called for ingenuity

BY SOPHIA NGUYEN

During a recent rehearsal, with three tall puppets shaped like fuzzy purple periscopes standing nearby, the cast and creators of the new musical "A Wrinkle in Time" were trying to nail a key scene of Act 2. It was a particularly strange and potent moment in a story full of them: Young Meg Murry (Taylor Iman Jones) lies crumpled on the surface of the planet Ixchel. She and her companions have crash-landed there, having suffered a terrible loss. Meg's soul has been injured. One of Ixchel's inhabitants (Andrea Jones-Sojola) draws near.

"Aunt Beast," Meg asks her, trembling, "will there be pain?"

"Yes," Aunt Beast replies, truthful but not unkind.

Their encounter is one of the most important in the original 1962 novel, according to Charlotte Jones Voiklis, lead producer and one of author Madeleine L'Engle's grand-

A rehearsal for "A Wrinkle in Time," a world-premiere musical that runs at Arena Stage through July 20.

daughters — so much so that the show's composer and lyricist, Heather Christian, avoided writing it.

Christian came to realize that the moment's power derives from its stillness: "In most children's books, there's just this constant feeling of adrenaline — of pushing forward to solve the problem, of getting more energy, getting braver, getting whatever," she said, as members of the creative team took a lunch break in the rehearsal room. "Madeleine slowed us down and took us to Ixchel to sit for a while."

"A Wrinkle in Time" follows prickly Meg, her brilliant younger brother Charles Wallace and their friend Calvin as they search the universe for Meg and Charles's physicist

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father, aided by three eccentric guardian angels known as Mrs Which, Mrs Who and Mrs Whatsit. It is quite plausibly the most mystically Christian, psychodramatically sci-fi novel ever to become a stone-cold classic of children's literature. It has also been adapted many times over — including as a movie, directed by Ava DuVernay, in 2018 — but Volkis had long hoped it would become a musical. “There’s just something about the metaphysical sweep of the story and the emotional intimacy” that seemed suited to the form, she said in a recent Zoom interview.

When the rights became available in 2020, Volkis seized the opportunity to assemble a team. Christian, who explored cosmological ideas and religious musical form in her 2022 work “Oratorio for Living Things,” signed on to write the music and lyrics. Lauren Yee, best known for “Cambodian Rock Band” and other plays exploring family and identity, came aboard to write the book. “It felt such like a wonderful gift,” Yee said, “at a time when it felt like large

parts of the world were being closed down and my world was getting very, very small — to be able to engage with something that is literally intergalactic and vast.”

Now, L’Engle’s vision — plainspoken and loftily intellectual, floridly odd and as consolingly familiar as a cup of cocoa — takes the stage in musical form. “A Wrinkle in Time” is making its world premiere at Arena Stage, and it appears to have Broadway aspirations. (Plate Spinner Productions, previously involved with “Here Lies Love” and “Girl From the North Country,” is attached to the show.)

Director Lee Sunday Evans, who won her second Obie Award for the premiere of Christian’s “Oratorio,” said the challenge of adapting this beloved novel for the stage was irresistible.

“You can’t travel to another planet,” said Evans. “You actually, on a theater set, you can’t even really change the floor. The floor has to stay the same. The walls, kind of, have to stay same. So how do you create a journey onstage that’s about traveling through space?” To phrase the issue another way, Evans continued: “How do we make these

places that don’t exist, from our world of things that exist?”

Take, for example, the famous sequence in which Meg and the other kids are carried on the back of Mrs Whatsit, whom L’Engle describes as transforming into “something like a horse but at the same time completely unlike a horse” — great — with “a nobly formed torso, arms and a head resembling a man’s, but a man with a perfection of dignity and virtue, an exaltation of joy such as Meg had never before seen.” Oh, and she also has winged shoulders “made of rainbows, of light upon water, of poetry.”

It would have been possible to rig the actors so they appeared to fly, said Evans. “But actually, if you put that onstage, that means the kids are fairly static,” she pointed out. “You can put people on a harness and get them up in the air, but once they’re up in the air — it’s one gesture.” Instead, the team decided to evoke the flight using a series of puppet wings, such that the audience never sees the whole of the fantastic Whatsit turned Pegasus. “There’s no face put on whatever the creature is — it’s provoked through the magic of actors onstage,” said

Evans.

The creators also wrestled with how to render Camazotz, the dark planet where the kids find their father. In the novel, Camazotz appears placidly suburban — so much so that the characters find it as familiar as home, before they learn that it lives under a totalitarian regime ruled by a malign intelligence known as IT. Provoking that same feeling today — the initial recognition, even attraction, that later turns into horror — would require updating the book’s cold war sensibilities, making its anxieties feel more contemporary.

“Madeleine’s Camazotz seems to be about living in a place that craves uniformity and craves order,” said Christian. “Some of that has shifted in this day and age.” Their version of Camazotz plays on different cravings — for safety, for convenience — and explores how productivity has become entwined with self-worth.

“What would make us, sitting in the audience, squirm?” asked Evans. “What does our society ask of us? What deal have we made? What have we opted into — about how our economy works, about how you

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Director Lee Sunday Evans, on bringing Madeleine L’Engle’s vision to life onstage



Producer Charlotte Jones Volkis, author Madeleine L’Engle’s granddaughter, said the novel’s “metaphysical sweep” and “emotional intimacy” work well as a musical.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL PILLI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

make a living, about you have work-life balance?"

"But it still feels like a part of *A Wrinkle in Time*," added Yoo. "Because it's about our relationship to time, how our perception of time or the scarcity of time makes us try to fit into these boxes."

Much of the world-building onstage is accomplished through music. Each planet has been given a distinct musical identity. *Camazotz* sounds like "a satanic Gilbert and Sullivan operetta," Christian said. "It's all very catchy, but it's very tidy. So nothing is behind the beat — everything is razor sharp, like a Mozart fugue." Earth, meanwhile, has more of a folk feel and largely uses a small ensemble of piano, bass, guitar and clarinet. The lush planet Urdl has a "sweeping lift and gait" and is inspired by a psalm quoted in the novel, "Sing unto the Lord a new song."

"Music is the most aggressive and manipulative form of dramaturgy," said Christian, who described musical theater as "very in control of itself and in control of an audience's reaction." But the show's creators



'A Wrinkle in Time' follows Meg, her brother Charles Wallace and their friend Calvin as they search the universe for Meg and Charles's physicist father, aided by eccentric guardian angels known as Mrs. Which, Mrs. Who and Mrs. Whatsit.

don't aim for everyone watching to come away with the same experience.

"I think you could be someone who read the book when it came out, someone who is parenting now and someone who is encountering the book for the first time as a young person," Yoo said. "To me, that would be such a satisfying audience to have, and have them all take different things from it."

Engle herself probably would have approved. *'A Wrinkle in Time'* famously had a hard time finding a publisher, in part because people didn't know who it was for, noted Vuiklis. "Was it adults, or was it for children? And she'd say, 'It's for people. Don't people read books?'"

If you go

A WRINKLE IN TIME
 Arena Stage, 1101 Sixth St SW,
arenastage.org

Dates: Through July 20.

Prices: \$59-\$199.