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Review: Whimsy and wonder of 'A Wrinkle in Time' come full circle at Lifeline Theatre



Sam Hook, Amanda Link, Rohan Link Francisco and Manali Sunkara star in "A Wrinkle in Time" at Lifeline Theatre. (Josh Bernaski)



By **EMILY MCCLANATHAN** | For the Chicago Tribune

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When Madeleine L'Engle finished writing "A Wrinkle in Time," publishers didn't know what to make of her unconventional blend of science fiction and fantasy, featuring adolescent characters yet intense themes.

Finally published in 1962 after dozens of rejections, the novel won the prestigious Newbery Medal and has remained in print ever since. James Sie's stage adaptation, now playing at Lifeline Theatre, captures the whimsy and wonder of a book that was groundbreaking for its time, though a few weaker points from the original spill over into the play.

Under Heather Currie's direction, Manali Sunkara makes her Lifeline debut as protagonist Meg Murray, a 13-year-old girl who's struggling both at school and at home. The daughter of two scientists (played by Victoria Cruz and Brian Tochtermann), Meg is too intelligent and impatient to follow the boring procedures required in math class, and she's prone to punch anyone who picks on her little brother, Charles Wallace Murray (Rohan Link Francisco). Even worse, her father went missing nearly a year ago while serving on a classified government mission.

After a mysterious encounter one dark and stormy night, Meg, Charles Wallace and their friend Calvin (Sam Hook) are whisked away on a journey through time and space to save their father and possibly planet Earth. They're guided by three otherworldly beings who, in their quirky terrestrial forms, go by Whatsit (Amanda Link), Who (Cami Stuckert) and Which (Jordan Gleaves).

For the adolescent characters, the choice to cast two adults (Sunkara and Hook) as teenagers alongside a child actor as the youngest of the trio makes for a slightly distracting mismatch. Francisco is quite the crowd-pleaser with his straight-faced take on the precocious Charles Wallace, and he shows impressive range when the character's arc takes a frightful turn in the second act.

Sunkara sometimes struggles to make Meg's awkwardness seem natural, rather than a product of overplaying a younger role, but she shares some genuinely cute moments with Hook as fellow misfit Calvin.

Aside from these three, all the other cast members slip into several roles throughout the play. Link shifts from a charming oddball as Whatsit to a sinister figure on the planet of Camazotz. Cruz presents two contrasting studies in motherhood: the warmth and strength of Meg's mother versus the pitiable fear of a Camazotzian woman raising her child under an authoritarian regime.

Cruz also makes a brief but endearing appearance as the Happy Medium, named with a pun for her optimism and gift of second sight.

Lifeline's production team creates an enchanting backdrop for the children's adventures. In an apparent nod to illustrator Ellen Raskin's first-edition cover of the novel, Lindsay Mummert incorporates circles into nearly every surface of her mauve, gold-flecked set. Props designer Sam Lancaster continues this motif by introducing several orbs in pivotal moments.

Joe Griffin's sound design and Sarah Riffle's lighting contribute to the ethereal atmosphere, while Jazmin Aurora Medina's costumes encompass the eccentricities and menace of the strange creatures the children meet on their travels.



Sam Hook, Rohan Link Francisco, Manali Sunkara, Victoria Cruz, Amanda Link, Jordan Gleaves and Cami Stuckert star in "A Wrinkle in Time" at Lifeline Theatre. (Josh Bernaski)

After reading the book for the first time recently (it was never in my school curriculum), I was curious to see how Lifeline would stage the scenes on Camazotz. The Orwellian parallels and Cold War overtones are strong on this particular planet, where a hive-mind entity enforces conformity through mass surveillance and zero-tolerance punishments.

To depict the robotic lives of its citizens, Currie and team employ clever stagecraft involving puppets (designed by Saskia Bakker) and rhythmic, repetitive dialogue. This analog solution is effective, though I was disappointed that the production turns one of the book's creepiest visual images into an abstract rendering.

Sie's script largely adheres to the source material, for better and for worse. After an intriguing start to the second act, the pacing begins to lag before resolving with an overly tidy and quick ending. In both the novel and the play, "love conquers all" feels like a trite resolution to such a high-stakes battle between good and evil.

Still, this fantastical fable communicates timeless truths for audiences of all ages: It's OK, even normal, to feel scared in the face of evil, but it's necessary to act anyway. And sometimes, personality traits that seem like faults are the very thing that will carry you through that fight.

Ultimately, "A Wrinkle in Time" is a story about family, friendship and self-acceptance — and, best of all, it's not afraid to get a bit dark and weird along the way.

Emily McClanathan is a freelance critic.

Review: "A Wrinkle in Time" (3 stars)

When: Through Oct. 18

Where: Lifeline Theatre, 6912 N. Glenwood Ave.

Running time: 2 hours

Tickets: \$47 at lifelinetheatre.com or 773-761-4477

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