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Review: I Capture the Castle at Watford Palace Theatre

WATFORD PALACE THEATRE ♦ MARCH 31 - APRIL 22

The idealism of childhood dreams: B. L. Sherrington finds love in this musical adaptation of Dodie Smith's 1948 novel.

[B. L. SHERRINGTON](#)



I Capture the Castle, Watford Palace Theatre. Photo: Richard Lakos

When you adapt a book for the stage, the risks are high. When it's the work of a beloved author like Dodie Smith, they're even higher. *I Capture the Castle*, Smith's worldwide bestseller, has been brought to life on stage as a new musical by writer and lyricist Teresa Howard, composer Steven Edis and director Brigid Larmour.

Dodie Smith's bohemian 1930s countryside feels close to hand at Watford Palace Theatre: we are out of the bright lights and dramatic noise of London, into a calmer and warmer environment, befitting the setting of Smith's classic 1948 novel. Telling the story through the eyes of 17 year-old narrator Cassandra (Lowri Izzard) – beginning with Smith's famous opening line "I write this sitting in the kitchen sink" – Larmour plays on the idealism of childhood. Her staging relies on a compelling combination of heartfelt storytelling and physical theatre.

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Cassandra hopes to follow in the footsteps of her father by writing a diary about her family, one suffering from what can only be described as eccentricity on steroids. Rose (Kate Batter), her irritating older sister, is as obsessed with a glamorous life filled with peach-coloured towels as her model stepmother Topaz (Suzanne Ahmet) is with inspiring artists. Topaz's need to act as another's muse is at times dripping with desperation, but Ahmet's performance gives a kooky charisma to this lady of the house.

James (Ben Watson), Rose's father, suffering from a twelve-year writers block, comes across like the villain at first, particularly when Rose whines about the family's failing financial situation. He appears stiff, as if he is deteriorating, when really he is simply living in another time – a time when he enjoyed the fruits of literary success.

Things begin to change, though: spring is in the air, and the family's wealthy new American landlord Simon (Theo Boyce) arrives with his handsome younger brother Neil (Luke Dale) in tow. Rose, who sees this as her chance to change her life, is sinfully flirtatious. She knows nothing of Simon and signs her life over to him in pursuit of her peach-coloured towels, always believing the grass is greener on the other side. Simon and Neil's mother, Mrs Cotton (Julia St. John), encourages James' attachment to his first novel by trying to influence his second, much to the dismay of Topaz.

The production emphasises the contrast in these characters' opposing personalities, goals and lifestyles. Rose and Cassandra are as different as could be. Rose initially insists on marrying for convenience, before abandoning her engagement to Simon and succumbing to the charms of Neil. Cassandra, however, a kind-hearted idealist whose youthful naivety is endearing, begins to develop feelings for Simon, her sister's intended. Simon is every inch the dream boyfriend with his kind heart and Hollywood looks, and is as infatuated with Rose's family as he is with her, maintaining their living arrangement despite a mounting unpaid rent bill. Neil, on the other hand is arrogant, talking unfavourably about James and Rose, yet keeping a high opinion of Cassandra.

Another major theme in Larmour's production is love, and its promises and pitfalls. Cassandra's orphaned admirer Stephen (Isaac Stanmore) is forcefully besotted with her, willing to go to extreme lengths to expose his affection despite his restricted income. Howard's lyrics emphasise this theme, and Edis' music captures the high-running emotions well, although his songs can feel superfluous to the action at times.

The set design is vital to bringing the story to life, imaginatively realising its infamous kitchen sink and using curtains to represent waves at the beach. This all ties in well with the use of costume, which is vivacious and full of colourful life. Mrs Cotton comes across like Cruella DeVille, while Cassandra and her family don humble, rural green throughout. Shona Morris' movement direction works well too, embracing the 1930s and embodying the story's sentiment in a selection of infectious dance numbers.

At its heart, *I Capture the Castle* is a coming -of-age story. It plays on our childhood certainty that life will turn out a particular way, and lays bare the emotions we feel when it takes an entirely unexpected turn. At times, Izzard plays Cassandra so youthfully it is difficult to realise her proximity to adulthood, and although this does make her romantic relationship with Simon feel implausible, the arresting heart of Smith's story remains intact.

I Capture the Castle is at Watford Palace Theatre until April 22nd. For more details, [click here](#).

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B. L. SHERRINGTON is a contributor to Exeunt Magazine

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DIRECTED BY Brigid Larmour

WRITTEN BY Dodie Smith, Teresa Howard (book & lyrics), Steven Edis (music)

CAST INCLUDES Suzanne Ahmet, Theo Boyce, Lowri Izzard, Isaac Stanmore, Shona White, Kate Batter, Luke Dale, Julia St John, Ben Watson

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