

Review: The Velveteen Rabbit at the Unicorn Theatre

17 MARCH - 15 APRIL

“Once you are real, you can never be ugly except to those who don’t understand.”
B. L. Sherrington reviews the Unicorn Theatre’s staging of *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

[B. L. SHERRINGTON](#)



The Velveteen Rabbit at the Unicorn Theatre. Photo: Helen Murray.

The Velveteen Rabbit is a highly adored 1922 children's book by Margery Williams. Part of its charm is the warm manner in which the shy stuffed toy is made real by the love of a little boy who receives him as a Christmas present.

In the stage adaptation directed by Purni Morell, the Velveteen Rabbit is played by Christian Roe, in no way resembling a rabbit. Roe is minus two floppy ears and a bushy tail. Instead he is a human adorned in a brown corduroy jacket. James Button's decision to dress Roe this way is a surprising choice for a children's production, with several of the children in the audience initially unclear who he was. However, this minimalist approach to costume design encourages the audience to embrace their imagination and enter into the world of make-believe.

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At its core, this is a tale about a toy rabbit stuffed with sawdust longing for the day he becomes real. Being real has nothing to do with the possession of a beating heart or a brain; it's about being *seen* as real by the child who loves you. The rabbit achieves this through the attentions of a young boy

enthusiastically played by Ashley Byam. Before seeing the production, I had expected the role to be played by a child, but Byam's ability to embody the innocence, excitement and joy of a child keeps the magic of Williams's classic story alive.

The theme of abandonment is threaded throughout. After finding the rabbit in his Christmas stocking, Byam is quick to forget about him in favour of other new toys. Roe's character is not exciting – he doesn't possess bright colourful features like the toy soldiers nor can he talk back like the wind-up toys. It is for this reason we experience the sense of isolation Roe portrays, which makes him something of a hero. He feels insignificant next to the

mechanical toys, wondering if he'd ever be seen as glamorous as them, until he bonds with the boy by sleeping in his bed and going with him on various adventures, which culminate in him telling Nana: "He isn't a toy, he's real."

The theme of abandonment, however, is outweighed by the ever present theme of love. It is the love the rabbit experiences from the boy that makes him real. And, as an older toy says, "Once you are real, you can never be ugly except to those who don't understand. Once you are real you can never be unreal."

A good deal of what keeps the production alive and capturing the audience's hearts is the use of sound. Both through music composed by Jason Carr and the exaggerated sound effects of Malachy Orozco, a sense of heightened drama is added. The fantasy world of the nursery is also beautifully captured by scenic Artist Sarah Hall. From a snowstorm to the illusion of fire during a camping trip, the characters' imaginative landscapes are realised with great care.

The production ends with Coe sat at the top of a bonfire ready for Nana to burn him, crying, "What use is it to be loved if it all ends like this" . Between his shivering and loneliness his tears create a flower attracting the fairy of the nursery. The voice of Hannah Gordon tells the Velveteen Rabbit "You were real to the boy because he loved you and now you will be real to everyone," before the creature is turned into a real rabbit.

This ending seems anti-climatic. While David Ganly narrates that the boy remembers the rabbit when they meet again, this passion isn't experienced, even with Roe holding a real rabbit on stage. It's also disheartening to not see the fairy whose magic has been pivotal throughout the play. Despite this, the Unicorn Theatre's production of *The Velveteen Rabbit* brings a lesser known classic to life gently, without coming across as soppy or depressing. With the political climate being as it is, it's a welcome lesson in the power of showing love to one another.

The Velveteen Rabbit was showing until 15th April 2017 at Unicorn Theatre. Click [here](#) for more details.

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B. L. SHERRINGTON is a contributor to Exeunt Magazine

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DIRECTED BY Purni Morell

WRITTEN BY Margery Williams

CAST INCLUDES Ashley Byam, Jason Carr, David Ganly & Christian Roe

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