



A Child's Christmas in Wales

Season's Greetings from a Great Poet

Dylan Thomas takes you away on holiday

"Years and years ago, when I was a boy, when there were wolves in Wales, and birds the color of red-flannel petticoats whisked past the harp-shaped hills, when we sang and wallowed all night and day...."

A Child's Christmas in Wales, a prose poem by the late great Dylan Thomas, transports the reader to holidays past. The lush language rolls along romantically, a heady mix of earthy and otherworldly imagery. Within those "harp-shaped hills," tipsy aunts sing and stuffed uncles snooze. For every useful gift received, there's also a delightfully useless one. A turkey lies on the table, a fiddler plays by the fireplace and the snow falls endlessly outside. Furthermore, should you have the good fortune to spot a cat, you must pelt it with snowballs immediately.

This month, the Gamm Theatre of Pawtucket stages a new adaptation of Thomas' classic holiday story. Written and directed by artistic director Tony Estrella, the Gamm's version begins with an older Thomas alone in a New York City hotel room. The year is 1950, and the poet's reading tour has kept him away from home on Christmas. When he hears carolers singing a Welsh tune outside his window, he conjures up his family and the holidays of 30 years prior.

The Gamm first produced *A Child's Christmas* back in 2003, with a different script. Aside from the structural similarity of placing Thomas at a hotel, this *Christmas* is a whole new show. Estrella's adaptation incorporates elements of Thomas' other poems, stories and letters, including the short story "Patricia, Edith and Arnold" and the famous villanelle "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night." The production also features live, traditional Welsh folk music. The ensemble cast creates sound effects and even makes snow throughout the show. And, while an authentic Welsh dialect would be nearly incomprehensible to American audiences, the actors still tackle Welsh in song.

In doing research for the play, Estrella found that Thomas wrote a great deal about his childhood. He

wrote with fondness and nostalgia, but also with what Estrella calls a "gimlet eye." He recognized the rough-and-tumble side of youth, and the sadness there, too. "It's not all *shucks* and *golly gee*," Estrella explains of Thomas' take. He "manages to poeticize all that stuff about childhood that sometimes our parents would rather forget about. Getting in fights, constant mischief, breaking things, smoking... It's got that messy fabric of life, and yet the language still manages to soar."

In penning the adaptation, Estrella could not avoid "a bit of literary ventriloquism" at times. But he tried not to take too many creative liberties, or to attempt to match the poet's style. To maintain the spirit, rhythm and humor of the original piece, he used Thomas' own voice whenever possible and let the language speak for itself. He notes, "The energy of the language is the energy of a child. It's exuberant. It's unpredictable. It's never maudlin or cliché. It's surprising, constantly. And I think that's why it's so funny."

The story of *A Child's Christmas* strikes a universal chord because it harkens back further than a past holiday, or a specific Welsh one in Thomas' memory. It recalls a past sense of magic once associated with the holidays. As Estrella puts it, "It celebrates that need we have to inform our current celebrations with the intensity of feeling that we can probably only have as children - when our imaginations were raw and free. I think, as adults, life sometimes conspires to dull our imagination. Stories like this are how we rekindle it."

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December 9-26

**The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre,
172 Exchange Street, Pawtucket
723-4266**

gammtheatre.org

On Stage

See what's going up this month

by Dawn Keable

You Pick the Date

Invite 20 of your closest pals, suggest an \$18 donation to cover tickets, pizza and beer, then transform your living room into a stage for Theater of Thought's production of **Matt and Ben**, to easily win the title of Most Amazing Holiday Party Ever. theaterofthought.com.

December 2-5

Poor **Kaspar**. The German youth showed up on the scene in the 1800s telling tales that didn't quite mesh, and inspired a play that questions everything from language to socialization. *Brown University, Leeds Theatre, 77 Waterman Street. 863-2838, brown.edu.*

December 3-January 2

No doubt **It's A Wonderful Life** this holiday season at Trinity Rep as six actors create 50 characters in a new live radio play downstairs, with *A Christmas Carol* above. *Trinity Repertory Company, 201 Washington Street. 351-4242, trinityrep.com.*

December 10-12

Been thinking lately that Santa at the mall could use a quick lap dance? **Jingle Belles and A Few Balls**, an evening of burlesque and camp, may be the only place to carry out your impulse. *Perishable Theatre, 95 Empire Street. 331-2695, perishable.org.*