

A Monster Calls- a review by Martha Summers

On Friday 1st of December, I had the great fortune to attend Princethorpe College's annual drama production - 'A Monster Calls'- a book written by Patrick Ness, and directed at Princethorpe by Ms. Cefaliello and Ms. Roberts.

What a fantastic production it was! It is a challenging piece of drama covering bullying, illness, loss and grief as well as looking at a number of close relationships within family and friendships. It was both thought-provoking and moving. It is hard for young people to play adults and the biggest compliment I can pay is to say that every actor was entirely believable, irrespective of the age of the character they were playing.

The content and themes were, I suspect, relatable to every audience member. I should also say at the start of this review that every member of the production played their part in making this a huge success, including the actors, the lighting and sound team and stage managers. The costumes were also excellent, as well as set design, and there was a very clever use of props.

The play is centred around the life of Conor O' Malley (played brilliantly by Monty MacAnara), a 13-year-old boy who is a carer for his mother (again brilliantly played by Orla Fleming), who is suffering with cancer. The play is about him coming to terms with her illness and her death. Conor is his mum's primary carer due to his parents being separated (and his father lives in America). His grandmother (on his mother's side), with whom he has a strained relationship, lives nearby.

Conor is in denial of his mother's condition and that her health is severely deteriorating. He is having nightmares each night. He also has great feelings of anger and grief over his mother's illness.

The story takes us through Conor's introduction to the monster and its subsequent visits to him, always at 12.07 (reference to this is cleverly reinforced in the scenery and the narrative). The monster however isn't a traditional "baddie"...rather, it is an ancient and powerful force and it

will help Conor come to terms with his mother's demise and his own emotions. The monster derives from the yew tree near his house (there are significant references to the yew tree throughout the story) and turns into the form of three females (played superbly by Dami, Elena and Eve). They will tell him three stories and in return the monster insists that Connor must tell his story...of his worst fear.

While Conor was being visited by the monster, he was having a very difficult time at school due to him being a victim of bullying. Jasper Nicholls played Sully, the ringleader, who constantly taunted Conor. Alongside Sully was Harry (played by Ruben Allen), who happily bullied Conor also, and Anton (played by Hannah Atkinson) who we could clearly see was reluctant to bully due to body language and vocal expression. Overall, the audience were taken aback by the bullies loud remarks, threats and physical abuse to Conor. I would particularly like to commend Jasper for how well he played this role, especially because he then later played an extremely contrasting character of Conor's dad, who is sympathetic and fairly timid.

The thing that I most took from this was the relationships that were portrayed between all of the characters. The message was the monster teaching Conor how to let go and to help him deal with his feelings of grief, loss and anger for the death of his mum.

The closing scenes were particularly powerful and well-acted. Conor reveals his biggest fear as requested by the monster. It is letting go of his mother's hand as she falls off a cliff. The monster tells Conor that he could have held onto his mum but that he let her go to end her pain. This is clearly symbolic of him losing her to cancer. The monster helps Conor understand that he is not a bad person and that his feelings are complicated.

The play ends with Conor holding his mum as she is dying. It is an incredibly powerful piece of drama!

I must also mention the excellent performance by Eve O'Brien who played Conor's grandma (her thick Scottish accent was incredible) as

well as Sophie McCormick (Lily), Imogen Sibley (Miss Godfrey) and Finley Ross (Mr Marl). The whole cast were brilliant.

My congratulations to everyone involved in this production – you totally moved us as an audience. It was extremely captivating, and left me realising that we worry way too much about superficial things, when really, we should focus on caring for and spending time with our loved ones for as long as we can. I can't wait for your next production.