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Good Strong Women: Malory Towers on Stage

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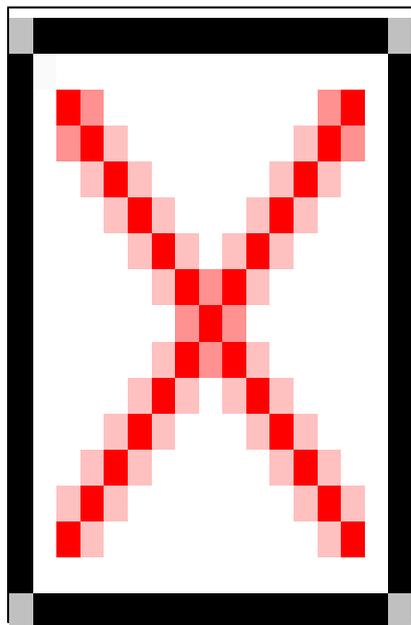
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Byline:

Rebecca Butler reviews the new musical version of her favourite series.

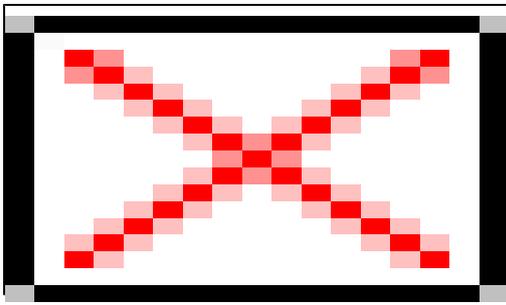
Complete with music and animation, the new theatrical adaptation of **Malory Towers** is a perfect piece of nostalgia for fans of the classic books. The show is adapted and directed by Emma Rice and will be showing at [several locations throughout September and October](#) [3].

Lifelong Malory Towers fan Rebecca Butler went to see it for Books for Keeps and shares her thoughts.



For the first time, Enid Blyton's famous six book series **Malory Towers** has been adapted into a stage musical. The company [Wise Children](#) [4] under its director Emma Rice staged the play in conjunction with York Theatre Royal and the Bristol Old Vic. This performance was staged in the cavernous Passenger Shed at Temple Meads railway station in Bristol. The songs included some old favourites such as *Sing, Sing, Sing* but were mostly original songs written for the play by Emma Rice, including a **Malory Towers** hymn.

Blyton has been criticised for the lack of diversity among her middle class white children. In positive contrast, a notable feature of this production is the diversity of its cast. Sally Hope, the best friend of protagonist Darrell Rivers, is played by Francesca Mills, who has dwarfism. Her disability was not emphasised in any way in the storyline. She demonstrated an astonishing agility. The character Bill Robinson was played by Vinnie Heaven, a non-binary trans performer. Darrell and Alicia Johns were played by people of colour.

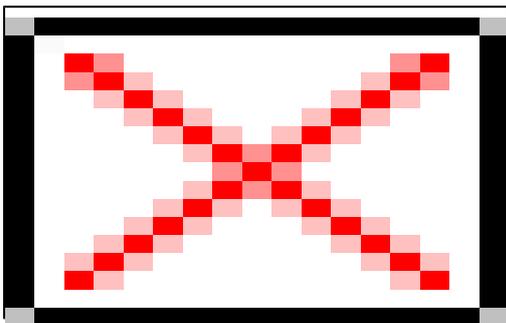


The part of Gwendoline Lacey is in many ways the hardest to perform. She is a snob, a liar and a bully, rescued only at the last moment by the dawning of guilt. Rebecca Collingwood ? incidentally also the most gifted singer on display - managed to portray this unpleasant character as a troubled child with a disturbed family background and many layers.

Rice explains why she chose to adapt **Malory Towers**. She mentions the show as being in tribute to the women who taught in the period between the wars and who ?devoted themselves to the education and nurture of other women?. Rice showcases these values through the inclusion of Miss Grayling, the head teacher of the school, voiced though seen only in silhouette by Shelia Hancock. She allows Miss Grayling one of the very few direct quotes from **First Term at Malory Towers**. ?I want you to be good, sound women the world can lean on.?

As a long-time admirer of Blyton?s original series, I would have liked to see more of the teachers in the stage production. Apart from Miss Grayling, the other teachers are neither seen nor mentioned. In the books some of the most memorable exchanges take place between pupils and teachers. Significant relationships are built up between pupils and teachers, an important part of the educational process Miss Grayling advocates.

For example, the pupil nicknamed Bill has a horse, Thunder. In the play the horse plays an important part in rescuing a pupil left hanging over the cliff, Mary Lou, played by Rose Shalloo. But a far more significant and stirring episode featuring the horse appears in the books. One of the teachers, Miss Peters, plays a leading part in saving Thunder?s life when the horse is challenged by colic. Of course everyone who has enjoyed reading these six books must find some of their favourite episodes missing from the stage presentation. This is the one most seriously missed by this reviewer.



The most striking features of this production were the music and the set design. The music was led by Mirabelle Gremaud, playing the harp as well as the part of Irene Dupont, a gifted music student, and by Stephanie Hockley, the versatile pianist. The set was simple but stunningly effective, featuring seats on a train, beds, a schoolroom, a swimming pool and a clifftop ? all contained within a single space.

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children?s literature.

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