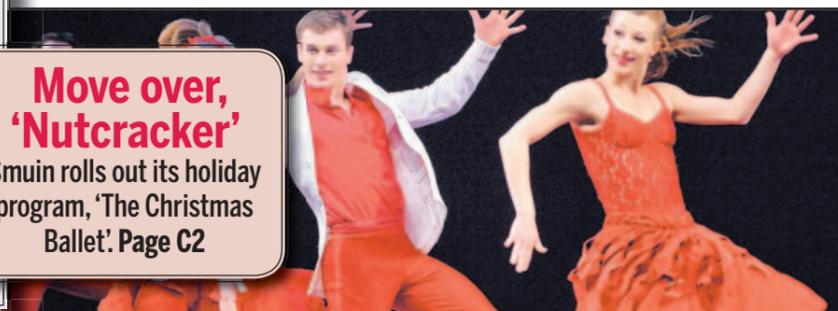


FUSION

A&E + STYLE + SOCIETY + COMICS + GAMES

Move over, 'Nutcracker'
Smuin rolls out its holiday program, 'The Christmas Ballet'. Page C2



THINGS TO DO ▶▶ Music, museums, theater, dance: It's all happening all over the Peninsula. Page C3

Bringing a haunting and lovely tale to life

TheatreWorks designer Joe Ragey explains how he makes the musical 'The Secret Garden' grow

BY JOHN ORR

Daily News Arts and Entertainment Editor

For theater designer Joe Ragey, the job of preparing a new show begins months before the actors get to the stage.

"I do a lot of research — all I possibly can — just so I know what has been done before, so I can go in a different direction," he said, in a phone interview from his Sunnyvale home. "What I like to do the most is find a new way to do it."

That's one of the reasons, he said, why he especially likes to work on new plays with Robert Kelley at TheatreWorks. Lots of room for creativity. When he works on a revival, such as "The Secret Garden," he has a somewhat different creative challenge: To find his own way with a story previously staged.

Ragey's history with the Peninsula's most creative and productive theater company goes back to 1985. He has designed something like 60 shows for TheatreWorks, including such beautiful productions as "Civil War Christmas," "Emma" and "Sense and Sensibility."

These days Ragey, 61, is seeing to the finishing touches for the sets for "The Secret Garden," which began previews on Wednesday, and opens on Saturday.

"The Secret Garden" began as a 1910 serial published in The American Magazine by English author and playwright Frances Hodgson Burnett. Published as a novel in 1911, it went on to many appearances on screen, beginning in 1919. Margaret O'Brien starred in the 1949 movie. There have been other versions for screen and stage, including the 1991 Broadway musical, with music by Lucy Simon and book and lyrics by Marsha Norman, which TheatreWorks is reviving.

Still, there are many different directions in which Ragey might roam, thanks to the fanciful magical reality of the story itself, and the haunting emotionality of the play by Simon and Norman. It is the story of Mary, a young girl who miraculously survives when everyone around her, including her parents and servants, dies of cholera in India. She is shipped to her uncle's home in England, where there are many mysteries. And lots of ghosts.

Dreamers

And the master hears the whispers

*On the stairways dark and still,
And the spirits speak of secrets
In the house upon the hill.*



Kirstina Sangsahachart / Daily News

Joe Ragey, set designer for "The Secret Garden," confers with lead scenic artist Tom Langguth as they construct part of the set at the TheatreWorks scenery shop in Menlo Park on Nov. 3.

It is Ragey and his team who must help Kelley get those Dreamers on and off the stage at the Lucie Stern Theatre, not to mention the ghosts of parents and servants who want to help the children they left behind.

"For this set," Ragey said, "I read the book before before I read the script — I knew Marsha Norman, who did the script, knew her years ago — and I really wanted

to do this show.

"Then I started meeting with Kelley. Then I read the script again, listened to the music, which I do a lot. It helps me key off a lot of the notes Kelley talks about, to give me direction on where to think creatively. Kelley was thinking about the ghosts and spirits in the play, the beautiful moments that sort of flash back in time.

SECRET GARDEN, page C3



Photo by Tracy Martin

Groundskeeper Ben Weatherstaff (Daniel Olson), left, has a moment with Mary (Angelina Wahler) in "The Secret Garden" at TheatreWorks.

THEATER PREVIEW

WHAT: "The Secret Garden" by Marsha Norman and Lucy Simon, based on the book by Frances Hodgson Burnett

PRODUCED BY: TheatreWorks

WHEN: Previews today and Friday; opens Saturday, runs through Dec. 31

WHERE: Lucie Stern Theatre, 1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto

TICKETS: \$19-\$72; 650-463-1960 or theatreworks.org



Photos by Kirstina Sangsahachart / **Daily News**

Joe Ragey, set designer for TheaterWorks production "The Secret Garden," looks over designs at the TheatreWorks scenery shop in Menlo Park on Nov. 3.

SECRET GARDEN

From page C1

There is a lot of magic and mystery. I wanted to explore those ideas."

Lily (a ghost)

I heard someone crying.

Tho I can't say who.

Someone in this house

With nothing left to do.

Sounded like a father,

Left alone, his love

grown cold.

I heard someone

crying.

Maybe it was you.

The story takes place in an ancestral manor in England. Lots of long hallways and creaky stairwells. And, outside, huge gardens and a scary maze. More than can fit on a theater stage. A creative challenge.

"I considered ways to present it visually, but keep the magic," Ragey said. "I wanted to make it more elusive, transparent. I wanted to make it lighter and airy — it's about memory and spirits, the music and actors bring that to the forefront — so went in a different direction with the sets. I haven't seen another production likes this."

Ragey's solution was to use silk.

"Silk is transparent," he explained. "You can see actors moving around behind it. They are seen in a translucent sort of fashion. It's almost a scrim-like kind of material, but it's much more beautiful than standard scrim.

"And all this has to move, so we have to track all of this. Six motors are used to track them back and forth inside four or five portals — and into that go all the furniture, the desks, the gardens, other elements."

Ragey said for this production, in the smallish Lucie Stern Theatre, they will "bring it out into the house, on thrust side stages." The set and actors also have to share room with a pit orchestra, and so the stage eventually stretches backstage, "as far back as Lucie Stern goes,"

Ragey said, as the title garden goes from death to life.

"You have to compete with so many other media," Ragey said. "You really have to do some magic on the stage. We have to do something extraordinary in the theater.

"That's what makes it one of the most lively and viable art forms that we have.

"I've worked for a lot of theaters," he said, "but this one,



Some of Joe Ragey's designs for the TheaterWorks production of "The Secret Garden."

TheatreWorks, is really special."

Ragey was born in New York, but raised in Florida. His theatrical training began Memphis when he was 18. "I was very lucky. The theater was run at the time by people from Joe Papp's Shakespeare Festival." He's designed more than 400 shows, and won awards all over the nation, including in the Bay Area.

He came to the Bay Area when his wife Nancy became a development director at TheatreWorks. She is now an independent philanthropy consultant. Their son Sam is studying law at UCLA. Their daughter Sara, who starts college next year, plans to be an actress.

In addition to what he does for TheatreWorks, Ragey teaches graphics and theater design at Foothill College. Part of the curriculum is describing the creative process.

"That's pretty well documented," Ragey said. "Read the script, do the research, talk to the director.

"But, as I tell my students, the first thing you do is get the contract. *Then* you read the script."

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