

HIS DARK MATERIALS PART I & II

It's easy to see the appeal of His Dark Materials for a large, young and talent-rich company such as Scottish Youth Theatre. Among the characters populating the multiple worlds of Philip Pullman's epic are shape-shifting daemons, evil scientists and armoured polar bears, and there's certainly no shortage of high drama in this story of good and evil that reaches uncompromisingly into the realms of religion, science and philosophy.

The scale of Nicholas Wright's two-part adaptation, first staged at the Royal National Theatre in London, makes it a daunting experience for the uninitiated. Three novels are crammed into two plays, and in addition to keeping track of the basics - who's who and what's going on - there are some bamboozling chunks of exposition to take on board. Flash-forwards punctuate the narrative, but confusingly, since the action of these scenes is explained only at the very end and the actors playing the central characters look and sound distractingly different from those playing their younger incarnations.

In part one, Kirstie Steele is perfectly cast as Lyra, the young girl whose parentage and destiny are gradually revealed as the story unfolds. Striking just the right balance between no-nonsense determination and vulnerability, she turns in a lively, charming and often comically cheeky performance in a production that stretches to three and a half hours. In part two, it's the adult characters who really come into their own, with Louise Mackay's Mrs Coulter and Robert Tracey's Lord Asriel clashing over Lyra's fate. In both instalments, the young performers in largely silent daemon roles are wonderfully expressive, not to mention enviably limber.

The adult Pullman fans beside me at part one were certainly charmed by SYT's production, which features stunning design by Kenny Miller and a haunting score by Andrea Possee. Perhaps Wright's interpretation is aimed pretty squarely at those who have read the books. Fantastic lines of dialogue hint at the richness of the novels, but it's clear that much has been sacrificed in order to fit in so much action. The episodic structure gives the plays an uneven pace, with the join between novels particularly noticeable in part one.

Nevertheless, this is a classy and hugely ambitious production, with a genuinely magical feel and some properly spine-chilling moments.