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The Neverending Story

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written and directed by **David S. Craig**

Roseneath Theatre, Young People's Theatre, Toronto

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"Every real story is a never ending story." Michael Ende

Roseneath Theatre's *The Neverending Story* is one of the most spectacular productions seen at Young People's Theatre in recent years with exemplary performances from the entire cast. This success is all the more remarkable because its source is a self-referential novel about what happens when we read a novel. If your children are already interested in reading and theatre, this play will only increase their interest. If your children have shown little interest in either, this may be the play that will win them over.

German author Michael Ende (1929-95) published *Die unendliche Geschichte* (*The Neverending Story*) in 1979. It soon became a publishing phenomenon, years before J.K. Rowling, by crossing over into the adult market everywhere it was translated. The story concerns a young boy Bastian Balthazar Bux (a wonderfully sympathetic Natasha Greenblatt), who is bullied at school and whose father (Derek Scott) has withdrawn from life after Bastian's mother's death. One day in escaping from his tormentors, Bastian finds shelter in a bookstore run by the uncongenial Carl Conrad Coreander (Walter Borden). Coreander tells Bastian of a magical book called *The Neverending Story* and when Coreander is

distracted Bastian steals the book on impulse and spends the rest of the day and night reading it in the attic of his school.

The book is set in the land of Fantastica. In the original it is “Phantásien”, which would much better be translated as “Fantasia” since this world is essentially the world of fantasy or the imagination. In the novel we learn that Fantastica is built on every dream that has ever been dreamed. In this strange world there is a boy the same age as Bastian--Atreyu (given an attractive innocence and daring by Adamo Ruggiero). He is a Greenskin warrior is hunting purple buffalo on the Grassy Sea with his trusty horse Artax (Billy Merasty), when he is summoned by an emissary of the Childlike Empress (Kate Besworth), the ailing ruler of Fantastica. He must find a cure for her disease which will thereby stop the destruction of their world by an unknown force called The Nothing (“Das Nichts” in the original that also means “the void”) which is gradually causing the realm to disappear.

During his quest, Atreyu undergoes many tests but eventually discovers that the Empress can only be cured by someone who exists outside their world--in fact, by the very person reading the book. Bastian’s enthusiasm for the story had causing him accidentally to intervene in the events, but now he is actually summoned to enter the world of Fantastica to save it.

The story makes up only the first half of Ende’s novel and is as much as playwright David S. Craig dramatizes. For an 85-minute-long work of children’s theatre seeking to promote an uplifting message this is fine. The first half already raises a host of complex questions about what happens when a person reads a book and how important imagination is not just in fiction but in life.

The second half of the novel presents the reverse situation to the first half and, from a pedagogical point of view, should not really be discussed until the meaning of the first half is clear. In the second half Bastian finds he has the power to restore Fantastica, but in so doing he becomes trapped there. With Atreyu’s help Bastian realizes that his father in the real world is now ailing (as was the Childlike Empress before), and he must somehow find a way to leave Fantastica to return to his own world. Thus the first half of the novel shows the dependence of the fictional world on the real world while the second half shows the dependence of the real on the fictional. It’s no accident that the central symbol of the novel, the medallion AURYN, represents two intertwined snakes each biting the tail of the other. The issues of the second half are thus conceptually more difficult than those of the first and probably lie beyond the recommended Grade 3 to 8 range of Craig’s adaption. Indeed, reams of scholarly articles have been written about Ende’s work in general and this novel in particular. So, while I prefer a stage adaptation of a novel to cover the entire work, here Craig has made the right decision for the age group he wishes to reach.

One would think that putting this kind of story on stage would be almost impossible, but set designer Glenn Davidson has solved the problems in simple by highly imaginative ways. The stage is flanked by two towers. The one on stage right is the attic where Bastian holes up to read his book. The lower part of the one on stage left is Coreander’s bookshop while the upper part is the hilltop

observatory of the aged gnomes, the scientist Engywook (Walter Borden) and his wife Urgl (Charlotte Moore), who save the life of Atreyu and his dragon Falkor (Richard Lee) and send him to the Southern Oracle that reveals the key to healing the Empress. During the prologue in the real world, the stage between the towers represents an urban streetscape. As soon as Bastian opens the book, however, white curtains drop over this scene and the characters of the book appear, rather like the words appearing on the white pages Bastian is reading. As he action progresses, the white curtains droop lower revealing black curtains behind them. These curtains represent The Nothing and at various points the black will intrude itself through the white and swallow up a character like an unlucky Troll (Richard Lee).

For the denizens of Fantastica designer Lori Hickling has created a series of increasingly fantastic costumes. Atreyu looks like a cross between a Viking and a Native American, clad in the skins of the purple buffalo he unwillingly is hunting. The actor Atreyu holds onto is easily identified as a piebald horse. But there are stranger things to come. Craig hides most of the aged character Morla (Charlotte Moore) when Atreyu speaks to all the better to reveal her as a giant turtle, her huge shell decorated with colourful lozenges. Yet, the one that really drew a collective gasp from the audience was that for evil Ygramul (Dalal Badr), who appears as an enormous shiny red and black spider.

David S. Craig admits that he was first exposed to Michael Ende's story through Wolfgang Petersen's superficial film from 1984. After reading the novel Craig realized how much more there is to the story that the film showed. The great virtue of his adaptation is that he goes straight to the heart of what the book is about--how the process of reading, or of appreciating any work of art, is not passive but active. We change the letters lined up on a page into images in our mind and that is where they reach completion. At the same time fiction and fantasy depend on the human imagination to create them. Without imagination we would live in a void. Even characters in Samuel Beckett's plays try to fend off The Nothing with storytelling. While the adventure tale appeals to children, the philosophical aspects appeal to the adults and give the adventure tale its depth.

My one complaint is that the play seems more to stop rather than end. Since Bastian's theft was atypical behaviour, it would help round off the story if he returned *The Neverending Story* to Mr. Coreander, as he does in the book, and find out that Coreander himself has visited Fantastica. It wouldn't hurt to let children know that not all adults lose their imagination as they grow older.

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Note: This review is a *Stage Door* exclusive.

Photo: Adamo Ruggiero as Atreyu and Richard Lee as a Troll. ©2012 Mir Lada.

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