

British Theatre Guide

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A Monster Calls

Patrick Ness

Bristol Old Vic At Home and Your Old Vic

Old Vic Theatre

5–11 June 2020

I was fortunate to catch [the touring version of this production](#) the month before lockdown, but this streamed recording, available only for a short time, is of the original cast performing at the Old Vic in 2018. I didn't hesitate at this chance to see it again, even on the small screen.

It is difficult to disentangle this book from the story of its creation. Siobhan Dowd was writing books for young people while she knew she was dying of breast cancer. *A Monster Calls* was the next in line when the illness took hold quicker than expected and Patrick Ness, a substantial YA author in his own right, was persuaded to take it on.

The story also revolves around a woman very ill with cancer (Marianne Oldham), but it is never mawkish or even remotely sentimental. The principal character is her son, 13-year-old Conor (Matthew Tennyson), who is looking after his mother as best he can while his dad (Felix Hayes) is with his new family in America, he doesn't get on with his prim and fussy grandma (Selina Cadell) and he is being bullied by charismatic Harry (John Leader) at school.

Mum keeps telling Conor that she will be fine, that the new treatment she is about to try next is the one that will do the trick. He says he believes her, reacting angrily when dad or grandma try to prepare him for the worst, but the reality of the situation, deep in his unconscious, and his guilt erupt in his frequent nightmares, bring the ancient yew tree in the garden to life to help him.

The yew is the Monster (Stuart Goodwin), who says he will tell him three stories on different nights, always at 12:07, and then Conor will tell the fourth story himself, and it will be the truth. The stories are like fairy tales but the endings are messy like life, not neatly tied up like children's stories, and the wrong people may end up winning. Conor's behaviour gets more erratic and violent in real life, until he finally confronts the truth, just in time.

The production was constructed as a group-devised piece over two weeks of development before director Sally Cookson and writer Adam Peck pieced it all together. The result has the ensemble feel and the physical adventurousness of a lot of devised theatre but with a much stronger narrative thread and emotional heart. On a basically bare stage (designer Michael Vale) apart from some stacking chairs and ropes along the walls, such as you might find in most school gyms, the performers conjure up the home and school locations clearly without resorting to the clutter of naturalism, but also take us into Conor's nightmares with the aid of Dick Straker's projections and a brilliantly varied musical soundtrack from Benji Bower.

But the real magic happens when the ropes are swirled around by the ensemble to become, before our eyes, the reaching branches, trunk and roots of the yew tree, with Goodwin's Monster looking down from on high.

This production has all of the technical complexity and imaginative staging as something like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* but with, for me, a much greater emotional resonance. Although the principal character is a teenager, this is a powerful piece of theatre for anyone at any age, especially if you have witnessed a parent deteriorate and felt guilty about your conflicting feelings—which are probably not too different at 50 from how they are at 13.

It is to be hoped that this production gets back on the road when theatres are back in business as it deserves a much wider audience, but in the meantime, take the opportunity to see this recording, as the theatrical joy and emotional punch will reach out to you even through the small screen.

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)