UNBOXING A MAGICAL TALE



MAGIC: Delights cast create the fantastical journey John Masefield in his home in 1935

ACE: Callum Balmforth as Kay Harker with the pocket of his character

WONDER: Jack Humphrey (Peter Jones), Balmforth and Mia Munus (Maria Jones) with the magic box

John Masefield's 1935 children's Christmas classic, The Box Of Delights, has been given a fresh lease of life in a dazzling new adaptation by the Royal Shakespeare Company. And not before time, writes DAVID BARNETT

WHILE The Box Of Delights isn't necessarily what you would call a "cool" children's classic, it perhaps does not have the widespread recognition it deserves. Which is surprising, because it laid the foundations for some much-loved household names, including The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe, Harry Potter, and even Doctor Who.

Now a new, lavish stage production by the Royal Shakespeare Company is hoping to rectify that and put The Box Of Delights where it belongs: back at the top of the league table of children's Christmas classics.

Adapted by children's author Piers Torday, it is from John Masefield's 1935 fantasy novel about a boy called Kay Harker, who is embroiled in an epic battle to possess an enchanted box with magic powers.

Kay is returning for Christmas from school to his family home Snakings but on route he is befriended by enigmatic Punch and Judy man Cole Hawlings and given the mysterious Box Of Delights to keep safe from evil.

Adventures ensue on the box – which allows its owner to shrink in size, to fly and to travel into the past – turns out to be a veritable gateway to excitement. And it's not long before some wrong 'uns, in the shape of Abner Brown and his gang of magical meheem, are on the trail of Kay.

The story was adapted for television in 1984, and proved to be a Christmas spectacle – with young Devlin Stanfield as Kay and former Doctor Who Patrick Troughton as Cole Hawlings.

Costing a staggering £1million, it was the BBC's then most expensive production ever, and viewers thrilled at Kay's many adventures underwater, shrunken in size, and with the enigmatic folklore figure Herne the Hunter. The special effects were considered innovative for the time, and the challenge for the RSC was recreating that magic on stage.

Torday says: "Like many people, I first came to the story through the BBC adaptation. I found it quite frightening and magical.

"The special effects might seem a bit hairy to us today but at the time they were really groundbreaking."

IT'S not the first time Torday has brought the story to the stage – he put on an adaptation seven years ago at Wilton's Music Hall in London. But the RSC gives him a much bigger canvas on which to paint Masefield's story. "We have amazing effects, we see Kay go underwater, we see him shrink, we see him in forests, we see him flying. It really is incredible," he says.

Torday himself is surprised that The Box Of Delights is not more widely known, and he is hoping his adaptation will rectify that somewhat. "It truly is the perfect Christmas story," he enthuses.

"I'm excited that we're introducing a new generation to it. Masefield was massively ahead of his time when he wrote the book. A lot of what we see in it we are now familiar with – there's a flying car, there are wardrobes that lead to other worlds, there is time travel. But Masefield was the first with all this, there was nothing like it at the time.

"Now we can see echoes of his work in Harry Potter, and The Narnia stories, and even Doctor Who. Masefield had it all in one story, and it's just one big, joyful, magical melting pot." Justin Audibert, the director of the new production, says that although the source material is all out 90 years old, it can't help but be attractive to modern audiences.

"I delved into the novel for the first time and was utterly enchanted," he says.

"There was something so truly timeless about it, with wolves, wizards and plucky orphans saving the day alongside something so much stranger and more existentially mythic – such as the primeval giant sea, soaring phoenixes and Herne the Hunter."

Solving the problem of bringing Masefield's vision of a succession of magical adventures to life on the stage was the starting point for the new show.

Audibert continues: "As most shows, you have one such staging issue to think about. For instance in Matilda, how do you theatricalise Matilda's incredible power to move things with her mind. But in this show, you quite often have two huge spectacles in a scene – for instance, we have to create a car that turns into an airplane and Herne's magical wood all in the same scene. What we have tried to hold in our minds when we have been solving these wonderful challenges is that we want the audience to experience the entire show as if they are stepping into the imagination of a child.

"This means that when we create moments of beauty and wonder we are asking the audience to go on that imaginative journey with us. It enables us to play with scale, to use all the tools that the Royal Shakespeare Theatre has to offer in terms of trap- and counterweight flying, we can use puppetry, video design, lighting design, sound effects and live music to make our world.

"We just keep going back to that idea of how would a child's mind create this incredibly vivid world."

A lot of those questions had to be answered by RSC associate artist and Olivier award-winning designer Tom Piper, who most recently designed the RSC's production of Hamnet that is about to transfer to the Gielgud Theatre in London. Did Piper ever get his head in his hands when he saw what was required of him and his team? "It is a very complex show," he laughs. It was Piper who hit upon the idea of showing the action as a child might imagine it, which gave them lots of scope for multimedia trickery to keep the audience engaged, while utilising the vast space of the theatre's stage.

Piper says: "We decided to frame the story around an old man taking his grandson to the attic and telling him the tale, and then we could see the attic as a springboard to all the adventures.

"We have 24 wardrobes all stacked up on stage and each one becomes a portal to the imagination and allows us to tell Kay's adventures with The Box Of Delights.

"In one scene, the baddies emerge from the wardrobes, and we used puppetry and then video and lighting effects, bringing all the magic that people expect from TV sets to the theatre." When Kay is underwater, rippling silks are used to give the effect of being beneath the waves, and when the characters fly, they do so on ropes with other members of the cast using their own bodies as counterweights.



FANTASY: Masefield's 1935 novel has thrilled generations of children

Piper says: "Samuel Wyer has used his puppetry design skills to create special moments and scenes with the fantastical characters. Using wardrobe doors, a car is created and then becomes an aeroplane (the 'aeroplane'), we use a puppet version of Kay when Kay has to become smaller – operated by the actor playing Kay."

For Piper, too, The Box Of Delights is a classic that really deserves to stay in the sun. He says: "It's well overdue that people realised what this story sits in the canon of magical writing.

"It was well before CS Lewis with the Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe, and Philip Pullman's books, but it has so much to give for fans of those stories."

THE actors certainly earn their crust, and due to the sheer physicality of all the roles, the child characters are played by adults.

Taking on the roles of the three children in the story are Callum Balmforth as Kay Harker and Mae Munus as the fearless Maria Jones, with both making their RSC debuts. Jack Humphrey returns to the RSC to play Old Jar rivals Andrew Peter Jones.

Stephen Boxer splits his talents between three roles – Grandpa, Ramon Lully, and Cole Hawkings, the man who entrusts the safety of The Box Of Delights to Kay.

Villainous Abner is played by Richard Lynch, seen on TV in The Hollow Crown: Lifelood and Keeping Faith, while Nia Gwynne and Claire Price job-share the role of Sylvia Daisy Pearmer, Abner's criminal sidekick. Everyone involved with the production is hoping it will bring Masefield's groundbreaking novel back under the spotlight and that the magic of the story can encourage a new generation of theatregoers.

Audibert adds: "There is nothing more special than being in the audience when a child first experiences the imaginative and emotional possibilities of live performance. It's a total privilege and a joy.

"These experiences and how they make you feel stay with you for the rest of your life. In terms of the challenges, the other brilliant thing about younger audiences is that they don't ever clap politely.

"If they are bored or confused, then they tell you about it immediately, and likewise if they are overjoyed or awed you know too."

● The Box Of Delights runs at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, until January 7. Visit rsc.org.uk for more details and tickets