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The Story of Opal: The Journal of an Understanding Heart

By Patti Roberts

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Opal has two stories and both are fascinating. How you relate to the one currently at the Foothill Theatre Company may differ from your reaction to the back story, but the theater's decision to separate the two helps the audience enjoy the staged version in its purity.

★★★★☆ This world premiere of *The Story of Opal: The Journal of an Understanding Heart* presents the original story in its full innocence, grace and poetry. The journal is one Opal Whiteley says she kept when she was six and seven, living in Cottage Grove, Ore. The Foothill production celebrates the author's amazing writing, where a child's incredible imagery, fertile imagination and lush literary language become poetry in motion under the sensitive touch of the cast and crew.

The back story happened in 1922, when Whiteley's journal was published in Life Magazine. It became an instant hit, as well as a target for scorn. Questions were raised about whether the journal really was the work of a child or the adult writing of the 22-year-old author. The language and sophistication did not reflect a small child's, and when the backlash began, Whiteley disappeared into obscurity. Eventually she was tracked down in a mental hospital in London, where she lived for almost 50 years before dying in 1992.

The play version of this journal, touchingly written by playwright Gale Fury Childs and beautifully rendered by director Lynne Collins, keeps strictly to the original written story. Yes, this is advanced writing, with a mature perspective that few children have. But if you can put doubts aside and embrace the idea of a world envisioned by an imaginative, intuitive and expressive child, it's a delight.

Opal creates a mythical land of gift-giving fairies, animal playmates and talking objects. The play also delves into heartbreaking tragedies that loom large in a young life. The production is reminiscent of Foothill Theatre's *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, and employs the same shared dialogue and blended voices. A luminous yet simple set engages the audience and breathes life in the narration. This is an ensemble cast, with Karyn Casl as the main Opal, and five others who narrate for Opal, as well as portraying various people, animals and objects. Whatever you believe about the journal, there's no doubt that this production creates a magical environment you'll wish was real.



Karyn Casl finds support from her magical friends in *The Story of Opal*.

The Story of Opal; 7 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 2 p.m. Sunday; \$11-\$26. Nevada Theatre, 401 Broad Street in Nevada City; (530) 265-8587; www.foothilltheatre.org. Through May 27.

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