

Eliza Noell, Contributor | Feb 16, 2024

Review: ‘The Giver’ at Clarence Brown Theatre successfully elevates original novel

“The Giver” at Clarence Brown Theatre opens slowly upon a set barren of life. Metallic panels stretch up at sharp angles, opening out onto a stage bathed in stark white lighting. A steel staircase is the only evidence of life, of people. The framed glow of a window is the back wall’s only decoration, rendering the set as more than a stage but an abrupt divide from the vibrant, saturated audience into the monochromatic stillness seen only in photographs, stoic and unknown.

As the lights in the house dim, the colorless stage begins to fill with people, all dressed in drab garments that tether them to the lifelessness of their surroundings. Children run and play in near soundless fashion, with only the patter of their shoes breaking through the quiet. Adults stroll about, greeting one another, their words unheard. A bike, stripped of any remarkability — save for its necessary functions — glides silently across the stage, weaving amidst the crowd untouched.

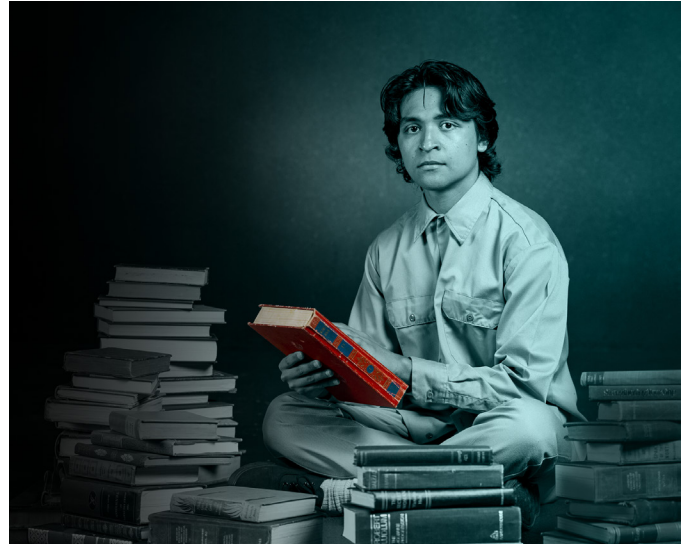


Photo: Jacob Leon; by Shawn Poynter

The opening scene of “The Giver” instantly constructs a clean dystopia. The communal engagement feels familiar and mechanical, each citizen bouncing amongst one another in reactions abiding solely to logic. There is no conflict, no mess, only a false naturalness wiped clean of any imperfection.

Jasmine R. Handy immediately stands out as the protagonist Jonas. Handy wholly embodies the childlike wonder and curiosity so essential to Jonas’ drive to discover. From the start, it is clear that Handy understands the character and his capacity to evolve.

Handy’s Jonas remains incredibly convincing through both a loose, energetic physicality and a youthful eagerness that precedes the inevitable pain the character will experience. Handy carries herself courageously, portraying Jonas’ slow realization of his imprisonment with an urgency that is incredibly compelling to watch.

The supporting cast is also very strong. Jacob Leon as Asher and Jenna Mitchell as Fiona both not only demonstrate the societally ingrained politeness and ignorance that their community has fostered but also accurately depict the distance growing between them and Jonas, driven away in a manner that mirrors a fleeting childhood. Their innocence does not feel forced, rather a tragic consequence of their world.

Drew Drake and Rachel Darden, who play Father and Mother respectively, are skillfully unflinching and even scary as Jonas’ parents, apathetic and unnerving in their maintenance of a model family.

David Ceccarini, as the titular Giver, performs with an admirable balance of empathy and sorrow, escaping the clichés that accompany the older mentor archetype. Ceccarini emphasizes the Giver's true role of not the host but the messenger of memory, and Ceccarini exemplifies the job's toll very effectively.

The show's opening, while a great preview, captures a fraction of Michaela Lochen's wonderfully designed set. The world of "The Giver" functions like a terrarium, the geometric imposition of its steel walls and artificial light not unlike a cage engineered to keep its contents under watch. The occasional but pressing buzz of an intercom shatters any fantasy that the citizens, even in their own homes, are alone.

Only the Giver is granted the luxury of clutter, his workshop adorned with a bed, piles of books, a leather chair. What quickly becomes Jonas' safe haven is armored in chaos, in color. It is where the dreary grays and browns of the world erode into vibrant reds, oranges and purples. It is where books line the walls in a vast invitation to knowledge.

The set of "The Giver" smoothly shifts back and forth from this freedom, transitioning back to the barren community quite creatively with sliding panels, minimizing major scene changes that add to the transition's fluidity.

Jonas' own experiences with memory are sharp and immersive, the set's back wall projecting what he sees with a swell of sound. Light serves as an extension of Jonas' sense of discovery, flooding the stage in rare bursts of color as he uncovers the mystery or immersing him fully when submerged in a memory.

A notable feature of director Marti Gobel's production was its use of American Sign Language, with the actors signing significant portions of their dialogue. Gobel attributes the choice of using ASL to the power language has in portraying danger.

"We strove as a group to create a community that uses language in the form of both ASL (visual) and oral communication (auditory) in order to cloud the true outcome of particular actions while simultaneously utilizing precise language," Gobel said in their director's note. "This led to the realization of a community and culture whose very existence is threatened day to day and yet the threat is not packaged in a way that correctly highlights the danger for what it is."

Gobel's direction succeeds in elevating Lois Lowry's well-known story. The theatrical format allows for the creative reinvention of the community's looming landscape, while still maintaining a solid, personal focus on Jonas' own journey. The set, actors and all technical aspects of the production seem to prioritize Jonas' development, reigniting the power of his character in Lowry's book.