

Neverending thrills

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Adamo Ruggiero (left) and Richard Lee co-star in David S. Craig's excellent adaptation of Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story*.

TORONTO - I've long suspected, on the not-so-rare occasions when politicians deride the artists and the arts, that their derision is motivated not so much by disrespect as by envy, pure and simple.

After all, to rule the world, or even the smallest corner of it, a politician must either rely on brute force (which, not surprisingly often proves unpopular) or do what artists do every day — awaken the imagination of those around them.

That is, of course, a subject and a theme beautifully explored in Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* — a book that tells the story of another book, one that exists only by its power to awaken the imagination of a child.

Not surprisingly, Ende's tale has found a broad audience in the artistic community — in the process, generating a movie back in the mid-'80s that was both memorable and successful.

Now, it's given us an appropriately inventive stageplay too, one which opened on the mainstage of Young People's Theatre Tuesday, where it will run through March 17, with additional performances added throughout March break.

Considering the high calibre of the adaptation, it should come as no surprise to learn that it is the handiwork of David S. Craig, erstwhile artistic director of Roseneath Theatre (the show's producers) and the imagination behind *Danny, King of the Basement*, which must surely rank as one of the finest pieces of theatre for young audiences Toronto has ever produced.

His tale starts in pretty contemporary fashion, as young Bastian, played by Natasha Greenblatt, prepares for school, already dreading what appears to be a regular encounter with the school bullies that plague his life.

With his widowed father's injunctions to quit being such a dreamer still ringing in his ears, young Bastian hasn't even made it to school however, before he's run afoul of the aforementioned bullies and is forced to take refuge in a bookstore, where, to spite the child-hating owner, he appropriates a book, which soon captures not only his attention but his imagination.

Vicariously, he shares the adventures of the heroic Atreyu (Adamo Ruggiero) and his horse (Billy Merasty) as they ride off to save the Childlike Empress (Kate Besworth) from the inexplicable malaise that is infecting her, and their world from the depredations of the Nothing, which is overtaking them all.

But while young Bastian starts out as an observer, he soon discovers (as voracious young readers have since the days of Gutenberg, one suspects) that he has become part of the story that enthralls him.

In directing his own script — itself a revision of work he did in Seattle — Craig conspires with his design team (set designer Glenn Davidson, costume designer Lori Hickling and sound designer Rick Sacks) to create an alternate world that excites the imagination of a young audience while still leaving plenty of work for them to do to get involved. It's a world of adventure, full of fanciful spiders and turtles and giants and dwarves that conspires to draw us into the story instead of simply shoving us into it.

Meanwhile, from his performers — the cast also includes Dalal Badr, Walter Borden, Richard Lee, Charlotte Moore and Derek Scott, each in a number of roles — he draws performances of the highest quality, refusing at every turn to allow anyone to talk down to his youthful audience.

In what proves to be an 85-minute treasure hunt, Craig piles on fun, creating a host of adventures, before he reveals that, on many levels, all the treasure we could ever need is stored up inside us and only needs to be unlocked so it can spill out into the world.