



Kate
Bassett

**Wolves in
the Walls**

Tramway
GLASGOW

Walls have ears – and fangs and claws...

Julian Crouch has been biding his time. True, this fantastic stage designer hasn't been lying entirely doggo since *Shockheaded Peter*, the crankily macabre West End hit for which he shockingly didn't win an Olivier Award. He has been abroad and conjured up a hallucinatory hell for *Jerry Springer: The Opera*. But now, with *Wolves in the Walls*, he has thrillingly returned to dark children's literature, translating it into fabulous looking, scary and funny theatre with co-director Vicky Featherstone. This is also an exhilarating premiere for Featherstone's new National Theatre of Scotland, co-producing with Crouch's company Improbable. Recommended for everyone brave and over seven, it's adapted from the children's book by Neil Gaiman about a girl called Lucy whose family flee (at least initially) from their home when nightmarish wolves leap out of the walls.

Crouch essentially captures the shadowy yet also magically glowing style of David McKean's original illustrations. At the same time, he and Featherstone play inventive theatrical games. Frances Thorburn's lonely but sturdy Lucy tucks up with her toy pig in a surreally vertical bed, at once entertaining and unsettling. During the day, when she's wandering around the house, a pack of stagehands in oddly wolfish clothes

(peaked caps and jodhpurs) sneak around behind her as if it's Grandmother's Footsteps, only the building itself seems to move because they're carrying the scenery – a creepy staircase here, a bleak receding corridor there. Lucy's home is also seen from the outside, hauntingly lit up against the darkness, with her tubby, nice but self-involved dad (Iain Johnstone) squeezed into one room with his tuba while, in another, her faintly witchy mum (Cora Bissett) obsessively stirs strawberry jam. The wolves proper – when they jump out, wound round the backs of four puppeteers – are ashen and raggedy, like decomposing corpses, with big snappy jaws and long trailing legs. Yet they prove hilarious too, behaving like partying squatters crossed with big babies. One turns into a scratch DJ, using a claw, while another casually trundles through the living-room dressed up like Little Red Riding Hood.

Admittedly, at this early stage in its tour, this show isn't knocking *Shockheaded Peter* into a cocked hat. The helter-skelter chases, choreographed by Steven Hoggett (of *Frantic Assembly*), need more work and the edgy score (by Nick Powell) occasionally becomes bland.

However, at its best, this is an extraordinary musical-cum-modern opera for kids. Newcomer Ryan Fletcher has a blast as Lucy's wannabe cool brother, playing thrash rock on his air guitar. And Featherstone intelligently teases out – without spelling out – what the wolves might represent, from fears of death to marauding yobs, from poltergeists to the fantasies of domestically frustrated parents. Worth catching.

k.bassett@independent.co.uk