Supposedly a family-friendly audience favorite, *The Secret Garden,* currently being performed a t Augustana College, is an emotional but often downright dreary musical based on the classic children's novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett. I know few children - or adults, for that matter - with the stamina to make it through this production, which lasted almost three hours on opening night. But duration aside, the decision by director Jeff Coussens and musical director John Pfautz to even
attempt
to stage
Garden
,
with its cast of 19 in the relatively-intimate Potter Hall, was an audacious one that succeeded on both vocal and visual levels.

This production marked the first collaboration in 10 years between the theatre department and Opera@Augustana. It was also one of the few local shows I've seen that relied so heavily on video projections to set each scene. Created by Bill Hannan and incorporated into the scenic design by Adam Parboosingh, the black-and-white drawings, which were projected onto white curtains, provided two-dimensional backdrops that ranged from a bland sitting room to the elaborate, blooming garden. The storybook effect of the displayed images occasionally distracted from the action in the foreground, but offered an innovative technical solution to the scriptural demand for frequent indoor-to-outdoor transitions.

As for the plot, it plods along with Mary Lennox (Robin Quinn), a newly-orphaned girl who has escaped the 1906 cholera epidemic in colonial India and come to North Yorkshire, England, to live in a mansion with her hunchbacked uncle, Archibald Craven (Christopher Scott). His wife, Lily (River Stanford), died shortly after childbirth, leaving behind their bedridden son, Colin (Samantha Bestvina), and the garden that she so lovingly tended. With help from the maid's brother, Dickon (Corbin McGhee), Mary discovers the key to the hidden garden door, and in secret, they revive both the withered foliage and the sickly boy.

In the symbolic *Garden*, self-imposed obstacles prevent each character from achieving his or her dreams. While this leads to some lovely moments at the end of the show, it makes the long process for a few of the characters difficult to watch - most annoyingly, Archibald Craven's gloomy laments for his dead wife. (By the time I'd endured the excruciating duet "Lily's Eyes," I wanted to scream "We get it, Archie! She's gone. You miss her. Now do something about it!") It wasn't that Christopher Scott was lacking in vocal talent. Quite the contrary. As the current artist-in-residence-in-voice at Augustana, he was by far one of the most gifted singers on stage. But how many times did *Garden*'s composer, Lucy Simon - sister of

Carly Simon - think audiences needed to hear a slightly altered rendition of Archibald's lonely verse? (Six, apparently.)

The most uplifting and infectious moments of the production occurred between the younger characters. Colin's and Mary's argumentative banter was charmingly portrayed by the actresses; Bestvina was convincing, both vocally and physically, as a frail, prepubescent boy, and Quinn also effectively captured the physical clumsiness of Mary, most notably in her mangled attempts at jumping rope. Dickon's songs "Winter's on the Wing" and "Wick" lent the otherwise depressing script a jolt of hopefulness and whimsy. These lyrics for these two were also some of the easiest to decipher, given the stylized numbers sung by Scott and Stanford, and the thick Yorkshire accent required of Kathryn Martin, who was phenomenal as Martha the maid.

A benefit to the theatre department's partnership with Opera@Augustana was that the majority of the 19 performers, even the nine Dreamers - who served as a kind of Greek Chorus that rekindled scenes from the past - were as vocally gifted as the lead actors. So even though the script slogged on, it was at least (usually) sung in an audibly pleasing way.

There were plenty of brambles among Lucy Simon's musical version of *The Secret Garden*, but I certainly hope that its production at Augustana gave the members of their large ensemble and design crew an unforgettable artistic and educational experience. After all, isn't that the purpose of college theatre?

For tickets and information, call (309)794-7306.