

2003/Oct PHILLIP PULLMAN

Adapting something for the stage is hardly groundbreaking stuff - right now you can see a Disney cartoon, a couple of pop groups, an American TV talk show host and a bit of the Old Testament at the theatre. But, come December, you'll be able to go and see a true theatrical first - the National Theatre's two-part dramatization, directed by Nicholas Hytner, of not one book, but a multi-award-winning trilogy: Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*.

Pullman's classic story, the third volume of which won the overall Whitbread Prize in 2001, centres around the remarkable character of Lyra Belacqua. Lyra is an almost feral 11 year old who lives in the Oxford of an alternate universe, a place "like our world, but different", as Pullman says, where everyone has a daemon, the inseparable physical manifestation of their spiritual self. A story which starts out as Lyra's quest to discover what's happened to her friend Roger, and the many other children who've mysteriously started to disappear, takes her - and us - on a panoramic, multi-dimensional adventure that is part mission, part love story and, at the same time, a powerful critique on the shortcomings of organised religion, fanatical zealotry and divine prejudice. Not your regular children's book, I think you'll agree.

While deep, profound and thought-provoking, *His Dark Materials* is never obscure and has attracted a devoted following - 2.7 million copies sold in the UK alone - which reaches out far beyond the limits normally associated with children's fiction. There has already been a Radio 4 adaptation, starring Terence Stamp as Lyra's father, Lord Asriel, and Emma Fielding as her mother, Mrs Coulter, and Tom Stoppard has recently completed the third draft of the script for the forthcoming film version.

Writers are notoriously protective of their creations, and I wondered how much control Philip Pullman has had over Nicholas Wright's version, and Nicholas Hytner's direction, of his work. "The point where you exercise what control you have is when you decide who to sell it to, that's the maximum extent of your power," he says. "So what you try to do is make

sure it goes to people who are going to treat it well, after that you don't interfere with them...there'd be no point in my interfering with Nick Wright and Nick Hytner, they know the theatre far better than I do, they're very, very good and they're doing a hell of a fine job.

"I saw the initial read-through of the first act of the first play with a full cast - fantastic, absolutely wonderful! And there's nothing I could do to help...I may have suggested one or two things to Nick Wright about tweaking this character or playing up that scene, or turning down the emotion at some point so that we could be cranked up later, but that's simply because I know the story well. He's generous enough to allow me to make these suggestions, but I wouldn't dream of interfering, firstly because I don't know how the form works and secondly I have too many other things to do."

Considering how he feels about his writing it is perhaps a tad surprising to find out how little Pullman knew of Hytner and Wright's work. "I had seen the film of *The Madness of King George*, and I liked it very much, but I'd seen none of Nick Hytner's theatre work," admits Pullman, "I hadn't seen any of Nick Wright's work either, although I did go and see *Vincent* in Brixton shortly after meeting him." So is there anything he regrets being cut from the original in Wright's version? "There is an important theme which is carried by a character who didn't make it to the stage; I talked about this with Nick Wright and he managed to give that function to another character, so the story doesn't suffer. It's what characters *do* in a story that matters, not who they are. Actually, in real life, what we do is more important than who we are, too."

Having handed his baby over to others to take off the page and onto the stage, was he happy with who has been cast? "Well...I've got vague ideas about who I'd like to play the parts when the film comes about, but when it came to the theatre it was a slightly different case because [for Lyra and Will, the young male lead] they had to cast older actors, not least for the simple reason of the time they'd have to be on stage, and Nick Wright's allowed for that with his very clever script.

"And Nicholas Hytner knows all the actors there are to know; he's chosen the most wonderful actress to play Lyra - Anna Maxwell Martin - who looks

perfect, sounds perfect, brilliant actress, couldn't be better...and I'm thrilled Patricia Hodge is going to play Mrs Coulter; I've long admired her, she has a sort of diamond-like brilliance which can be both hard, like a diamond, and warm...exactly right for the part. So everything's fine." And, in case you were wondering, Timothy Dalton plays Lord Asriel and Dominic Cooper is Will.

As we finish I idly wonder if there's a cliffhanger at the close of Part I, and if so, what it might be. "Of course there's a cliffhanger," replies Pullman, "but do you really expect me to tell you what it is?"

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His Dark Materials, parts I and II, played at the Olivier theatre, London, with sets designed by Giles Cadle and costumes by Jon Morrell; the book *The Art of Darkness: Staging the Philip Pullman Trilogy*, which follows those involved in the project over the six months leading up to its first night, was published in January 2004 by NT Publications, in association with Oberon Books.