

# Theatre Review: Book of Beasts

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THE idea of a child who becomes king or queen for a day is one of the keystones of children's literature; it's not so long, for example, since TAG Theatre delighted audiences with their version of Janus Korczak's powerful political parable, King Matt.

But long before Korczak began his career, the English writer E Nesbit – Fabian, free-thinker, and author of *The Railway Children* – had published her *Book of Beasts*, in which a little chap called Lionel receives an unexpected call from the Prime Minister, and finds himself not only crowned king, but also given access to the royal library, and to a very strange book indeed.

By their own standards, Catherine Wheels's new stage adaptation of Nesbit's story – now on a long Scottish tour, including this year's Imagine Festival – is relatively straightforward, old-fashioned stuff. On a stage set with a few simple props, a cast of three (including Ian Cameron as the Prime Minister, and Catherine Wheels's boss Gill Robertson as Lionel's nurse) lead us through a classic illustrated narrative. The two adults tell us the story of Lionel's adventure, while a recorded version of David Trouton's vigorous nursery-rhyme score fanfares away in the background; and Scott Turnbull – as the increasingly troubled boy – learns some tough lessons about curiosity, risk and the hard business of taking responsibility for your own decisions.

There's real magic, though, in the show's use of simple physical materials, and subtle shifts in Lizzie Powell's beautiful lighting design, to evoke a dramatic story of dragons and monsters, political disaster and recovery, with such a light touch. The narrative is crystal-clear; and the little children in the audience are rapt throughout, visibly gripped by the idea that when you open the pages of your favourite book, anything can happen, and sometimes does.

The full article contains 304 words and appears in *The Scotsman* newspaper.

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