

'Sandman' lures with dreamscaped wonder

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[Enlarge image](#) | [Order reprint](#) Puppetry plays a big part in 'The Sandman and Other Wonders.'

Oftentimes, children's theater simply doesn't work. The flubbed lines, shoddy stage production and wildly off-cue musical numbers can truly be appreciated only by the parents and grandparents of the child actors themselves. And it just gets worse when you're talking about a puppet show.

Enter *The Sandman and Other Wonders* - an exception that not only proves what a great children's show can be, but expands and charts a new course of theater to be appreciated by anyone looking for a little escape from the doldrums of realism.

The 45-minute mask, shadow and puppet performance showcases a talented group of children and teens, and weaves in puppet and shadow-puppet mastery with nearly seamless finesse. The whole show delves into the realm of dreams and imagination, and most all parts of the show are solid. While performed by kids, the choreography in some puppet numbers calls to mind ones you'd find in professional theater. And the musical numbers, from Ozzy Osbourne to the Pixies (yes, the Pixies) to a rap number, are surprisingly solid.

Divided into six vignettes, the show begins with a larger puppet slumbering and the dream creatures (children and puppets) who emerge from its mind. The separate dances performed are meaningful to each one's particular puppet, and the children in attendance especially seemed to enjoy the dancers' playful interaction with them. While a nice intro, the play really finds its stride with *Where the Wild Things Are*, the children's classic retold with great enthusiasm. In it, the young Max is magically (and musically) whisked away to the land of the Wild Things and hilarious chaos ensues. Most notably, the creature masks, done with skillful imagination by Steve Myott, are just the perfect touch. And watch out for Peter Tarantino, the child actor playing Max, who has a good future in theater.

As with all children's theater, there are issues that can't be avoided. It's not *The Great White Way*, nor is it meant to be. The only thing that you end up wishing for are more puppets. The show is aided by adults Melinda Miles and Daren Jackson, who seem to push the children's performances with their own acting bravado. In fact, the only strong complaint from last Sunday's show was the commotion caused by a parent or grandparent loudly unwrapping a new camcorder battery.

Credit co-directors and co-writers Chris Nealy (the puppet mastermind) and Gina Gambony with a unique show, something that is missing in Wilmington theater. Watching the play, you can't help but wonder how truly spectacular such a show would be if it were to be performed by a seasoned theater group, adding an even darker plot line. While this weekend's show - its final run - could easily be forgotten in the chaos of the Azalea Festival, it's a good atmosphere for a quick air-conditioned break from the magenta madness, and an opportunity for children to experience something other than the oddity of flower worship.

The Sandman has the magic, so do your young ones a favor, and fall under its spell.