

THE WESTSIDER

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Kate Kimberly and Andrew Knott in *The Secret Garden*, playing at Loews Columbus Circle, Cineplex Odeon, Chelsea and other theatres.

Murry Close

'The Secret Garden'

Look Ma, No Compost

BY MARK HALL AMITIN

Film

Director Agnieszka Holland (*Europa, Europa* and *Olivier, Olivier*) has taken a simple tale, based on the book by Frances Hodgson Burnett, adorned it with breathtaking landscapes, three astonishingly natural children and the always delightful Maggie Smith. Here is a story of

longing, loss and discovery which ultimately gives way to mirth and, as the garden itself reveals, new life.

"The Secret Garden" opens in the dusty majesty of the raj of colonial India. The score is appropriately exotic, the color scheme dominated by reds and golds. A little girl, already in a world of her own, is left orphaned as an earthquake ravages her home and takes the lives of her parents. The director then abruptly drops us, with little Mary Lennox (Kate Maberly) into the watery dark blues and grays of England, where she's been shipped with hundreds of other orphans of the quake. As the others are greeted by loving relatives and swept homeward, Mary sits atop her valise alone into the night, awaiting the arrival of her uncle by marriage (husband of her mother's twin sister) but is eventually met instead by the rigid and cruel head of household, Mrs. Medlock (Maggie Smith), who all

but drags her to a carriage for the long trek to the barren and desolate wintery countryside and the Gothic manse with the tongue-twisting name of Misselthwate.

Mary is virtually tossed into a room that nearly swallows her up and from which she hears the distant wailing of another child. She is warned not to wander about. Of course, she does and finds a room that belonged to her Aunt Lillias, untouched for a decade since her passing. In a music box, she discovers a key that later unlocks the door to the secret garden. Hung with musty mystery, the film moves slowly and thoughtfully through Mary's fears to ultimate acceptance of this new "reality." She also discovers in her sojourns through the nighttime hallways another child, her cousin Colin (Heydon

Prowse,) the same age as she, bedridden and pale, lonely and as frightened.

She is aided in her unraveling of the mystery of the garden by Dickon (Andrew Knott), her maid's younger brother, and Martha (Laura Crossley), both of whom show her kindness and friendship. With Dickon, Mary plants a new garden that magically takes root. The only special effect in the film shows the bloom of flowers and trees explosively progressing from the starkness of winter to the bright light of spring. She convinces her cousin, Colin, that he need not be bedridden — a sinister plot by the heinous Mrs. Medlock — and encourages him to go out-of-doors for the first time in his life. Released from his imprisonment, he now dictates tyrannically to the household staff, as they stand on the stairway, surgical masks across their faces. "I have spoken, all depart." Tyranny breeds tyranny?

The conspiracy of children, nature and love triumph over cruelty and fear. Mary tells Colin, "The whole universe is inside." The children stage a triumphant and wild nighttime ritual with a roaring fire in the garden. Colin does some magic; he implores and convinces the powers of nature to bring his father home. Wouldn't you know it, across the channel, Lord Craven (John Lynch), morosely overwhelmed with an endless sense of loss, suddenly awakes, like that, from his stupor in a Parisian hotel lobby and demands to go home immediately. He does and is reunited with his romping, playful and amazingly healthy son and niece. The ending is a new beginning. Even the once-wretched Mrs. Medlock sheds a tear. Bring a Kleenex. ☐