

# Michael Morpurgo's magical words

Wizard storyteller Danyah Miller does justice to Morpurgo's fine novel *I Believe in Unicorns*

## Theatre

*I Believe in Unicorns*: Livestreamed to front rooms everywhere

From Thursday, April 16, to Saturday, April 18

By JON LEWIS

WIZARD Presents' artistic director, the storyteller Danyah Miller, along with her director, Dani Parr, have adapted Michael Morpurgo's 2005 children's novel *I Believe in Unicorns* for the stage in co-production with the Palace Theatre Watford and the Royal & Derngate Theatres, Northampton. Presented onstage, livestreamed by the Oxford Playhouse, Miller is a natural storyteller, enthusing

her online audience with plenty of gasps expressing surprise and enthusiasm.

The set (designer, Kate Bunce) is piled high with books suggesting both the library in an unnamed village and its surrounding mountains, probably in former Yugoslavia due to the Slavic names in the story. Books are central to Morpurgo's tale, repositories

of history, culture and magical fantasies. In the production, they act as stores for enchanting pop-up houses and animals, holders for scrolls upon which are beamed projections of film (Arnim Freiss) and lighting effects (Will Evans). One book is created like a Russian doll, smaller and smaller stories being unveiled, mirroring the dramatic structure where one narration contains another, and then another.

Miller plays the village librarian, who owns a model of a unicorn and thus is known as the unicorn lady. She invites children to the library to listen to her stories and enjoy the power of their imagination. One of the children who attends is Tomas, encouraged by his mother against the advice of his father who believes that one day in the mountains is worth a month in the schoolroom.

About halfway through the play, Miller stops for a digression, playing a game with the audience in an element of pre-programmed interactivity. The website instructions invite viewers to email her someone's name, a place and an object, around which she has three minutes to weave a new story. This moment of improvisation brings in a girl called Charlotte, Alaska and a cucumber; clearly other shows will differ, making this performance a bit more unique for the viewers at home.

As often with Morpurgo, he wraps adult concerns in a coating that younger children can cope with – here the serious subjects are Second World War atrocities and a more recent war in which Tomas and his father save the library's books from a fire. Miller is a superb storyteller and has done justice to Morpurgo's fine novel.



*I Believe in Unicorns* Photo: Richard Davenport.

## Potter's spring clearance sale

COLLECTORS of the work of former Aldermaston potter Harriet Coleridge, who now has a pottery in Ewelme, near Wallingford, might be interested in her spring clearance sale on Saturday and Sunday (from 11am to 5pm).

This sale will be held in the garden and there will be pots of all shapes and sizes – from the salt kiln, tin-glazed ware from the electric kiln, porcelain glazed with celadon and

stoneware glazed with carbon trap shino.

It will mostly be stock accumulated over the past 20 years, along with a few seconds. All the prices will be dramatically reduced.

During the sale the studio will not be open. New work will be exhibited in the studio during Oxford Artweeks (May 15-23), along with work by three other exhibitors, so the two events are very different.

## Oscar-winning rape-revenge thriller



Promising Young Woman, starring Carey Mulligan, wins Best Original Screenplay. Review by CAMERON BLACKSHAW

A RAZOR-sharp revenge thriller that is equal parts savage and sweet, *Promising Young Woman* is a stunning feature debut from writer-director Emerald Fennell. It won her the Best Original Screenplay Oscar. Some will be put off by its frank and unflinching take on sexual assault and its lasting effects; it's not always the most comfortable film to sit through. But its tongue-in-cheek spin on a very contemporary and relevant issue is deserving of the waves the film is currently sending through the rest of the industry.

*Promising Young Woman* stars Carey Mulligan as Cassie, a 30-year-old med school dropout who still lives with her parents and works a dead-end job at a local coffee shop.

Unbeknown to those around her, Cassie's nights consist of going out to bars and clubs and feigning drunkenness in order to teach a lesson to men who take advantage of her. The film's opening scene shows us one of these typical nefarious escapades.

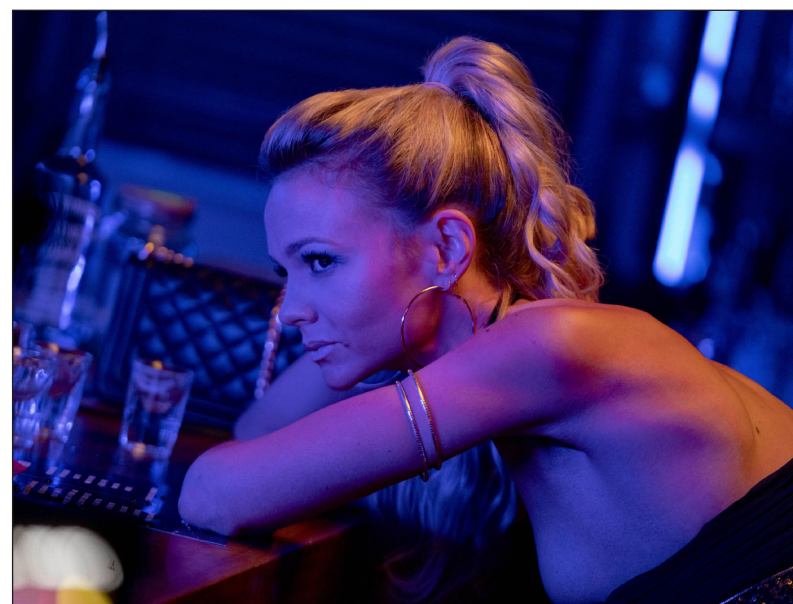
As we're unaware that Cassie is really the one in control, it's stomach-churning to watch the predatory words and actions of the man attempting to violate this inebriated woman. But just before anything happens, Cassie reveals her sobriety with a sly smile before the neon-pink title card bursts through like the first level of a videogame. Cassie walks down the street holding her heels in a victorious version of the walk of shame; a perfect beginning to the

film that follows.

The key to *Promising Young Woman*'s success is Emerald Fennell's complete control over the film's tone. The neon and pastel shades that dominate the film's colour palette perfectly match the electro-pop soundtrack. The witty and realistic dialogue grounds the film, never allowing Cassie's vigilante ways to pull things too far from reality. The entire film is so cohesive in its look, feel and message, an impressive feat for someone making their first feature-length movie.

Carey Mulligan's performance continues to display the actor's incredible versatility and range. She's a real force throughout the film, dominating all the scenes she's in. Fennell's direction is key in establishing such an interesting world, but it's Mulligan who rules over it. Bo Burnham also flexes his dramatic muscles as Ryan, Cassie's former classmate who becomes a potential love interest for her.

It doesn't take too long for *Promising Young Woman* to reveal Cassie's motivations in her perennial quest, and it's made all the more effective when we never quite see the results of many of her crusades. Is she a murderer? Or does she just scare the men half to death? Whatever the



*Promising Young Woman*

case, the ambiguity is tantalising. As the narrative starts moving, it's clear to see where the film is heading. Cassie's exploits escalate in severity with every new target. There are some twists along the way, but the story does move towards an inevitable climax. However, hopes are dashed in the most shocking of ways. The film's conclusion is truly jaw-dropping.

*Promising Young Woman* is a beautiful nail-biter with a powerful message that will leave a lasting

presence in the minds of all who watch it. One that might have been considered a dark horse coming into this year's awards season, the praise that the film is getting shows otherwise. If her debut film is anything to go by, Fennell's stylish methods of filmmaking will produce more wonders for years to come. Available to stream on Sky Cinema.

**Promising Young Woman (15)**  
Running time 1hr 53

Rating \*\*\*\*



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