 LORD OF THE RINGS
By J.R.R. Tolkien.
A stage adaptation using giant puppets by Théâtre Sans Fil.
At the Shubert Theatre
Friday, Nov. 21 at 8pm.
Saturday, Nov. 22 at 2 pm and 8 pm.
Sunday, Nov. 23 at 1 pm and 6 pm.

By JULIAN WEST

THE ADAPTATION of "Lord of the Rings" by Théâtre Sans Fil is an ambitious undertaking to bring Tolkien’s masterpiece to the stage. However, given the enormous success of their "Hobbit," it seemed inevitable that the Montreal-based Théâtre Sans Fil would try it. After its premiere last year, the English language production earned unprecedented praise and has now gained the momentum for a pre-Broadway run.

While "The Hobbit" was an unqualified theatrical success, one had to suspect that any adaptation of the six-book epic Lord of the Rings would have to be somewhat abbreviated. Suspicion were not allayed by the safety curtain, which presented a clipped version of the famous "Three rings for the elven kings..." prologue.

Surprisingly enough, most of the plot was there, although it was evident that mounting the climactic battle scene posed a problem. The program notes contained a synopsis more detailed than an opera's, lost the audience get confused. But even more surprisingly, the show was comprehensible even to those with only glancing familiarity of the work. This, for a start, put it above and beyond the animated film effort.

What principally distinguishes the stage work is that Théâtre Sans Fil understands the nature of magic. Any stage work is a little magical and only in a theater, as opposed to a film, can one illusions work more.

The stage effects, some being tried out in Boston for the first time, were marvellous. They started off slowly, with a hobbit vanishing and reappearing in a hail of pixie dust but the fireworks, literally, soon started. Best was Gandalf's magic wand, a clipped version of the famous "Three rings for the elven kings..." prologue.

Strider from Théâtre Sans Fil's adaptation of "Lord of the Rings"

As for the life-sized puppet characters, there were over 70 and they were in classic Théâtre Sans Fil style. The hobbits, three-feet tall with broad, simple-looking faces, worked fine in the whimsical "Hobbit" but were a bit too conical for "The Lord of the Rings." The elves — wiggly, unstationary things manipulated by the hands and arms — were so stylized as to be impressionistic. This should settle the complaints of those who feel that staging the work is to deny the necessary element of imagination.

What most people will find disturbing is the rather high-tech nature of some of the production. The technology is not concealed beneath a veneer of magic, but is obvious. It is most evident in the decidedly android elves and the torchlight eyes of the orcs and magali.

Boromir and Aragorn, the human characters, were costumed players but might as well have been puppets: their disjointed, exaggerated gesticulations blended in well with those of the puppets.

Some of the sets were simple, but most were effective. Here the high-tech was more appropriate as in the lighting effects for the even forest. One scene transformation, from a giant canvas map to a mountainous landscape, was particularly stunning.

The voices were recorded, which makes it seem that there was little acting going on. But once one considers how well synched the stage actions were to the voices and music, this prejudice is dispelled. And the soundtrack makes it easy to switch between French and English performances. The groups has even performed in a foreign language: four performances of "The Hobbit" were given in Cantonese in Hong Kong.

Another advantage of the soundtrack was the recorded music, which could not easily have been done live. Mostly synthetic, the music developed naturally enough from that used for "The Hobbit."

No modern Théâtre Sans Fil production would be complete without blacklight and various other lighting effects, and these were there in profusion. Other tricks, such as puppets flying out over the audience and orcs parading through the aisles, were also effective. The puppets ranged widely in size and complexity, the smallest and simplest being luminous bats. A dragon, though not as impressive as the Smog from "The Hobbit," was enormous.

How well all this is going to fare on Broadway is anybody's guess. But when serious black-costumed puppets ran on, still hooded, for their traditional curtain call, the applause was long and loud. Indications are good.

Visually exciting "Lord of the Rings" adaption by Théâtre Sans Fil

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