

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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## 'Junie B. Jones' holds charms for all ages

By Christopher Rawson  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Should you not be acquainted with Junie B. Jones, diarist, drama queen and adventurer in life, you have been missing a lot.

I am just such a deprived person, unfamiliar with Barbara Park's two dozen Junie B. Jones books because my own children pre-date them and their children live at too great a distance to have introduced me. But I have just made her acquaintance in the spunky person of Carole Bufford, thanks to Pittsburgh International Children's Theater, which has imported an engaging touring version by the indefatigable pros of Theatreworks USA.

This "Junie B. Jones" is a musical with funny book and lyrics by Marcy Heisler and score by Zina Goldrich, based specifically on four of Parks' books dealing with the adventures of Junie B (never just Junie!) in first grade.

It's not earth-shaking stuff, perhaps -- right off, Junie B discovers her best friend from kindergarten has new best friends; she needs glasses; she gets a new lunch box; she tries to juggle -- but they are momentous enough to scrappy, sassy Junie B, as they would be to any 6-year-old. And of course it is the exact mountains that Parks, Heisler and Bufford make of all these molehills that give the show its comedy and heart.

That former best friend, for example, is named Lucille, and her two new friends, twins Camille and Chenille, are played by two men, to

the great delight of yesterday's nearly sold-out Byham Theater audience (some 1,200 strong). That one twin is white and the other black just doubles the fun. Right from that trio's early doo-wop number, the show takes off, with even the unfamiliar audience knowing that the creators have the wit to entertain adults as well as children.

As a frame, Junie B introduces her "Top Secret Personal Beeswax," the first-grade diary she intends to keep, and a giant version of that journal forms the show's backdrop and set. The story is episodic, a few chairs and signposts moving quickly to suggest home, school, lunchroom, bus and playground.

The young performers (mainly just out of college) mutate easily, too. Bufford is always Junie B, but Mike Backes, Felicia Hudson, Alison Faircloth, Maurio Brown and Jason Lowen double and triple the other roles. Yes, this means adults are playing kids, but they do so without much false cuteness: Faircloth, for example, is just as natural as bossy May as she is as Junie B's mom; Hudson plays princess Lucille as well as Hispanic Jose.

Goldrich's dozen tunes mix in light pop-rock and R&B (doo-wop is the default) with variety and zest. The original direction by Peter Flynn has been re-directed for tour by David Coolidge (Theatreworks sends out several companies, I believe); they and a couple of choreographers keep things moving nonstop.

The show's mood is definitely upbeat, and the lessons June B learns are ones Mister Rogers would endorse. But the show's true delight is

### STAGE REVIEW

#### 'Junie B. Jones'

**WHERE:** Pittsburgh International Children's Theater at various locations.

**WHEN:**

Byham Theater, Downtown, today, 10:15 a.m. (sold out) and 12:15 p.m.;

Kelly-Strayhorn Theater, East Liberty, tomorrow, 7 p.m.;

Pine-Richland High School, Thursday, 5:30 and 7:30 p.m.;

Moon Area High School, Friday, 5:30 and 7:30 p.m.;

Mt. Lebanon High School, Saturday, 10:15 a.m.;

Gateway Middle School, Monroeville, Sunday, 2 p.m. (sold out).

**TICKETS:** \$8.50 advance, \$10 at door. 412-321-5520.

that it stays convincingly in Junie B's voice. She's a very adult little diva with a touch of buoyant irony who addresses everyone as "people!" and says things like, "It is very sad to talk" or "I was not actually expecting that development."

Come to think of it, I think I have a couple of Junie Bs among my grandchildren -- at least, I hope so. I'm glad she's going to be around for a week, doing nine more performances at the Byham, the usual suburban sites and the Kelly-Strayhorn Theater in East Liberty.

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