

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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THURSDAY, JANUARY 12, 2006

## Theatreworks/USA serves a sweet mix of seven musicals

By Christopher Rawson  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It takes "The Phantom of the Opera" 2 1/2 hours to tell one musical story, and it still leaves gaps; but Theatreworks/USA, the ever-dependable touring company for kids, manages to tell seven musical stories in less than one hour, with nary a plummeting chandelier or bucket of dry ice.

And they're charmers. The evidence remains hereabouts through Sunday, as "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie & Other Story Books" continues its rounds of the suburban sites staked out for many years by the essential Pittsburgh International Children's Theater.

I know, I know, the comparison with "Phantom" isn't fair, because there is an enviable simplicity to the stories in "Cookie." The books that are the subject of these seven mini-musicals aren't familiar to me, but they sure are to the target audience, which intensifies the pleasure.

For me, there's plenty to enjoy in the artful innocence and idiosyncrasy of the stories, the varied musical idioms with which they're told and the personal verve and flexibility of the professional acting ensemble of six.

I guess "Imogene's Antlers" (original book by David Small; book; music and lyrics by Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx) is my favorite. Partly that's because it's the most substantial, so long it's divided into three parts, and partly because of the wonderfully unfussy Imogene of Valerie Isseibert, on whom tall, fuzzy, beige antlers look just great. ("They're strong, they're sturdy, I don't look so nerdy, and they go really well with my hair.")

You could call "Imogene" a comic kids version of Kafka's "Metamorphoses," complete with an enigmatic

happy ending. This is one of those shows that makes you want to extend the pleasure by reading the book; my grandchildren are getting copies, after I enjoy them myself.

The show starts strong with "Martha Speaks" (Susan Meddaugh; Arthur Perlman and Jeffrey Lunden) about the dog that ate alphabet soup and turned out to have a lot to say. Playing Martha is Lindsay Northern, my company favorite, who shines in many other roles, including one with a funny Canadian (Dakotan?) accent.

In "Owen" (Kevin Henkes; Faye Greenberg and David Evans), a family solves the increasingly disgusting blankie problem. "Amazing Grace" (Mary Hoffman; Kirsten Childs) advances the comforting proposition that you never know what you can do until you try. And in "Math Curse" (Jon Scieszka; Mini Dickstein and Daniel Messe), bewildering questions ("Does tuna fish and tuna fish equal four fish? What's half a pizza divided by apple pie?") turn out to be easier than feared: the answer to the second question is lunch.

Most distinctive musically are the title show, "Cookie" (Laura Numeroff and Felicia Bond; Jeremy Desmon and Patrick Dwyer), and "Borreguita and the Coyote" (Verna Aardema; Lopez and Marx). The former is translated into sprightly country-western mode and the latter into a comic mariachi ballad.

The rest of the appealing acting company is Matthew Cline (the Jim Carrey look-alike), Angela Arnold, Erica Nicole and Jeremy Zoma. They're particularly good playing grown-ups, grown-ups being a point of humor in many children's books.

David Armstrong and Kevin De Aquila direct with pace and efficiency. One of the appeals of live theater is the unpredictable: at the Byham Theater Sunday it was a slight tilt to

### STAGE REVIEW

## 'If You Give a Mouse a Cookie & Other Story Books'

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

**WHEN:**

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

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

Mt. Lebanon High School, Sat. 11 a.m. and 2 p.m.;

Gateway Middle School, Monroeville, Sun. 2 p.m.

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

the stage that sent set pieces on wheels rolling off where they shouldn't, to the delight of the audience -- and the cast handled it just fine.

These clever little 5- to 15-minute musicals didn't just happen. The sharp-eyed will notice some significant names among the creators, who write for grown-ups, too. Perlman and Lunden go back to the moving musical version of "Wings" at the Public Theater in 1994. Dickstein wrote the lyrics for the Broadway "Little Women." And Lopez and Marx wrote the Tony-winning "Avenue Q" and are, of course, very hot, working now on a musical version of "South Park," among other projects.

So do not condescend to "Cookie": It's an entertainment fit for any age from, say, 3 up to super senior. Make your children take you.

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*Post-Gazette drama critic Christopher Rawson can be reached at [crawson@post-gazette.com](mailto:crawson@post-gazette.com) or 412-263-1666.*