

VARIETY

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OFF BROADWAY

IF YOU GIVE A MOUSE A COOKIE & OTHER STORY BOOKS

(LUCILLE LORTEL THEATER; 299 SEATS)

By STEVEN SUSKIN

Gotham parents who have been spending over \$100 a pop to take their offspring to flat-footed Broadway musicals -- like the recent "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang," among others -- might want to high-tail it downtown to the Lortel. "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie" is 60 minutes of theatrical enchantment for kids, with enough intelligence and imagination to hold adults as well. And here's the bonus kicker -- like Liev Schreiber or Meryl Streep in Shakespeare in the Park productions, it's free!

A not-for-profit that caters to family audiences, TheaterworksUSA has been presenting free summer theater in Manhattan for 18 seasons, now. The idea is not only to entertain but also to foster an appreciation of theater; with "Mouse/Cookie," it's a cinch. This is not children's theater, mind you. It is pure theater, with a capital I for imagination.

"If You Give a Mouse a Cookie & Other Story Books," to use the official title, presents vignettes from eight children's books, adapted by seven sets of songwriters. Strongest are "Amazing Grace," by Kristen Childs ("The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin"); "Martha Speaks," by Arthur Perlman and Jeffrey Lunden ("Wings"); and "Borreguita and the Coyote," by Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx (Tony winners for "Avenue Q"). The latter, especially, is uproarious and leaves the house beaming.

The six-character cast is uniformly likable. Best known is Stephanie D'Abruzzo (the original Kate Monster in "Avenue Q") who essays

the talking dog Martha. Farah Alvin wins the kids over before she even talks; her body language -- crouched over the table with the friendliest of smiles, with her striped-stockinged knees a-knocking -- gets the first vignette off to a strong start. She continues warm and friendly in all her roles.

Carla Woods is touching as Grace (who auditions for "Peter Pan" despite being the wrong sex and the wrong color) and delicious as the little lamb Borreguita. Aurelia Williams does a sympathetic job with the mother figures, while Nick Blaemire and David Austin charm as the mouse and the boy who gives him the cookie. Blaemire is especially funny as the not-too-wily Coyote bested by Borreguita. That skit also features D'Abruzzo, Williams and Austin as a sleepy trio of flavorful gauchos on cardboard guitars.

Actors and writers aside, the secret to "Mouse/Cookie" is director-choreographer Kevin Del Aguila, heretofore known as the librettist of "Altar Boyz." His staging is filled with charming gags, often involving those cardboard props, which brought forth roars and kept the youngsters absolutely glued to the stage. While choreography is minimal, Blaemire has two sections that are astonishingly funny: an exuberant leap for Owen, a boy with a fuzzy blanket, in which the dancer's legs swing out like windshield wipers; and a gleefully villainous step for the coyote (happily repeated for our delectation).

The children at the Lortel -- and there were plenty of them on opening night, ranging roughly from age 4 to 10 -- were positively lapping it all up, as were the adults.

The 1985 children's classic which gives this revue its title tells what happens when you give a mouse a cookie: he next wants milk, a mirror (to see his milk mustache), a nap and then comes back for another cookie. Give a kid theatrical imagination -- even without flying cars, flying actors and the like -- and he or she will sit engrossed, as quiet as a mouse. Although during "Borreguita" the pint-sized patrons were literally bouncing for joy, like so many jumping beans.