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TheatreWorks 'Web' weaves charms for JCC

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If charm were a measurable commodity, the Franciscan Center would have had a corner on the market yesterday afternoon.

That's where TheatreWorks, a professional acting troupe from New York, put on its production of *Charlotte's Web* for the Junior Theatre Guild, an arm of the Jewish Community Center.

Shirley Williams, the cultural director of the JCC, has been trying to bring *Charlotte* to area audiences for several years.

Based on the classic children's novel by E.B. White, the TheatreWorks production featured a cast of six, some of whom doubled in their roles, for the hour-long show that, of necessity, compressed some parts of the novel but kept the basic story and all of the heart.

Robert Chew was simply wonderful as Wilbur, the engaging pig who only wants to stay alive and enjoy the warm sunshine with his friends. Clad in a pink long underwear, complete with buttoned back flap, and a pig's nose, Chew gamboled about on stage, as serious about making himself become a pig in the eyes of his young — average age, about 6 — audience as any method actor out to earn an Oscar.

The Junior Theatre Guild's goal is to introduce youngster to the magic of live theater, and TheatreWorks

furthered that aid beautifully. The uniformly excellent cast was spell-binding in its ability to tell the tale of friendship, loyalty, and courage with the simplest of props: a barn painted on canvas; a fence that shifted positions to indicate different locations; and a few bales of straw and an eating trough that was the centerpiece of a ribtickling sequence in which Wilbur and his young owner, Fern (Doreen Chila), save Charlotte the spider from being squished by Fern's older brother.

Playing Charlotte, the spider who comes up with the "miracle" that saves Wilbur and is rewarded beyond measure, was Celia Schaefer. If Chew was the epitome of porcine grace, Schaefer was his equal at recreating a spider's crawl. With her black scarf, sunglasses, and spangled gloves, she projected a lot of character into a limited range of movements.

Chila was exuberant as Fern, who could talk to the animals though no one would believe her, as well as Mama Goose, the fast-talking, waddle-walking barnyard newscaster.

Equally outstanding, though in smaller roles, were Daniel Hicks as Homer and Brian Weiss as Templeton the rat. J. Robert Spencer's narration stitched the scenes together with a storyteller's unobtrusive skill.

Congratulations, TheatreWorks. Thanks, Junior Theatre Guild.