

VARIETY

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OFF BROADWAY

MAX & RUBY

(LUCILLE LORTEL; 299 SEATS)

By MARK BLANKENSHIP

The most refreshing thing about "Max & Ruby," the musical adaptation of the popular children's books and subsequent Nick Jr. cartoon, is that the characters are allowed to be innocent. Parents who have seen the trailer for the upcoming "Alvin and the Chipmunks" movie -- in which Simon ogles a housekeeper and Alvin eats a ball of his brother's waste matter -- may be grateful that bunny siblings Max and Ruby are mostly worried about showing their grandma they love her. As an added bonus, this gentle, 45-minute tuner is also pretty good.

Presenter TheaterworksUSA always hires seasoned writers, and this time it has commissioned a book from Glen Berger ("Underneath the Lintel") and music and lyrics from Carol Hall ("The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas"). Both do strong work.

Berger's script shows great respect for the kindergarten crowd. The characters are mostly under 8, but they live in a world where their ideas are taken seriously.

For instance, when 7-year-old Ruby (Kelly Felthous) decides to write and produce a play for her grandmother (Nancy Slusser), the whole town hears about it and gets excited. Hence, young imaginations are encouraged. And though 3-year-old Max (Lee Markham) can't stay focused on rehearsal, his wandering mind is an asset. Reveries about glow-in-the-dark eels and giant tarantulas evolve into musical numbers, proving that fantasy makes playtime more fun.

Throughout, Hall's music is catchy enough to grab little ears. "Bunny Scout Anthem," a legit-style ode to Ruby's community service club, features lovely harmonies, and "Cowboy,"

which stages Max's romp with a lobster, is a spot-on homage to prairie music.

Designers are equally creative. Louisa Thompson's pastel set bursts with hidden doors and fold-out walls, and costumer Junghyun Georgia Lee suggests both tyke clothes and animal parts without overselling either. (Her wittiest touch is the grown-up neighbor whose "baby" is a human doll with rabbit ears on its head.)

Honoring the tone of the writing, director Randy White lets the show be for children instead of their parents. Scenes are directed with patient pacing, so that ideas have a chance to sink in. There are no sarcastic in-jokes or apologetic winks to the adults in the house -- just a single, direct narrative that is methodical-ly portrayed.

The relaxed tempo has rewards. When Max has a nightmare about a giant blue tarantula, icky spider legs start sliding around his bedroom doorframe. The creature is funnier because it emerges so slowly, accompanied by a cool jazz beat.