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A JOYOUS CELEBRATION

The Yellow Boat is a wonderful play
that will delight children and adults

by Christopher Kamera

"Does it hurt much to die?" This direct question from an 8-year-old dying of AIDS is heart-breaking in itself. The parents' honest answer, a simple "Yes," compounds the dramatic impact. The boy's reaction, "I thought so," simply puts the question in perspective, in a touching production of *The Yellow Boat* continuing through Feb. 19 at the Seattle Children's Theatre at the Seattle Center.

Children who are ill, or who have family members or friends living with HIV/AIDS, are often virtually isolated from others facing the same concerns. *The Yellow Boat* is one of the first dramas to deal with HIV/AIDS and children. It's also a wonderful play—an imaginative, joyous celebration of one boy's life that will delight children and adults with its compassionate approach and its inventive staging.

The title comes from a Scandinavian folk song that Sonja Saar used to sing to Benjamin. Three boats went sailing, the song says. The blue one was filled with hope; the red one, filled with faith. The yellow boat "filled itself with love." At the end of the day the blue and red boats sailed home, but the yellow boat sailed to the sun. Benjamin loved the song. He cast his mother and father as the blue and red boats but imagined himself as the yellow boat soaring into the heavens. His vivid, crayoned illustration of the yellow boat gives the production its program cover, and the staging recreates the drawing in the play's final moments.

The Yellow Boat is certainly a play about living with and dying from HIV/AIDS. Benjamin contracted HIV from infusions of Factor 8, a protein

injection used to help hemophiliacs with blood clotting. In a stunning theatrical moment, red ribbons of torn fabric tied together provide the necessary Factor 8. In one transfusion, something is different—two sections of the ribbon are dark blue. At that moment, the entire opening night audience—adults and children alike—became completely silent. Children as young as two could clearly see that "something was wrong."

While Benjamin's death is the inevitable outcome, the play is full of

joy and hope, full of affirmation of living and loving. Some of the humor comes from the interaction of Benjamin and his friends. Some of it is honest, direct, painful confrontation of reality. When his best friend brings plastic Frankenstein bolts into the hospital room for Benjamin to play a trick on his doctors, he asks, "Are you going to die?" Benjamin confirms the obvious. The friend hesitates and then asks the logical question: "Can I have some of your Legos?" The moment gets the biggest laugh in the show.

A grant from the Winifred Ward Memorial Fund, a "Dare to Dream" Award, helped in the development of *The Yellow Boat*. The Winifred Ward Memorial Fund honors the pioneer founder of the children's theater movement in this country. It's fitting that this new, topical play has been indirectly nurtured by the visionary woman who maintained that children's drama was important to the growth and development of every child.

The Yellow Boat continues public performances weekends and some weekdays through Feb. 19. Ticket information is available at (206) 441-3322. In dedicating the new, intimate Eve Alvord Theatre, Linda Hartzell noted her belief that "the laughter of children is the voice of God." That's a fitting tribute to the life of Benjamin Saar.

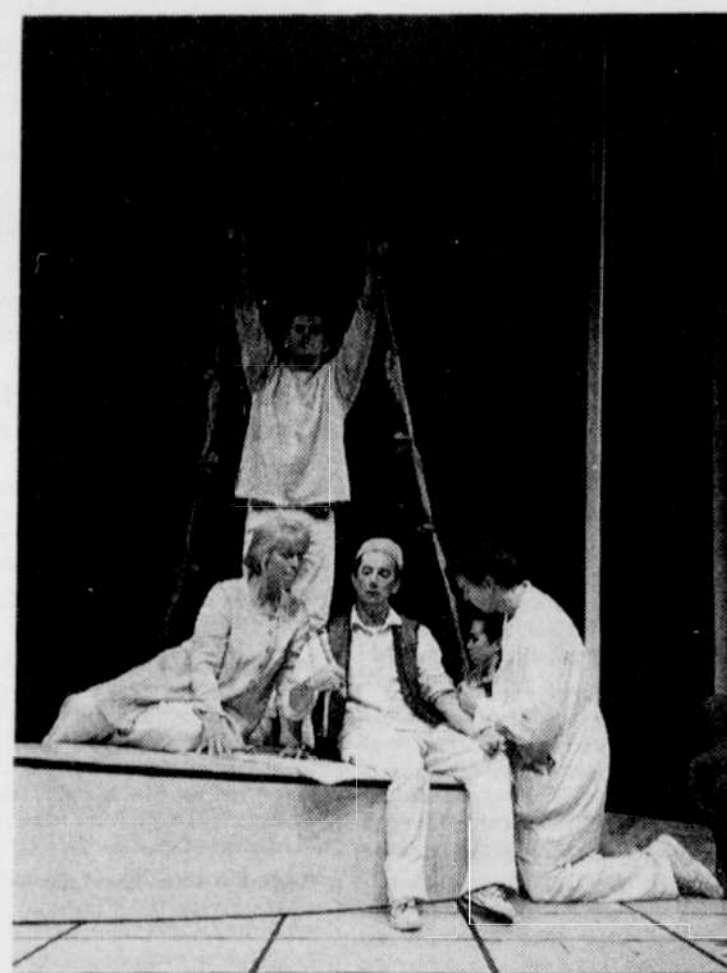
Theater

The play chronicles the "eight years, four months and 29 days" of the life of Benjamin Saar, the only child of David and Sonja Saar of Tempe, Ariz. David, the founder and artistic director of Childsplay Inc. in Tempe, used his family's experiences and Benjamin's life as a hemophiliac as the basis of *The Yellow Boat*. He directed the current SCT production, as he has the other stagings of the script. Benjamin's artwork is used throughout the production, and a display of his original creations are on exhibit at the Pacific Arts Center, a gallery adjacent to the theater.

The skeptical reader now asks, "A children's play about AIDS? And the kid dies? What's going on?"

Well, a lot is going on. Nationally, children's theater has long ago abandoned stereotypical nursery rhymes and classic children's stories as the only suitable topics for young audiences. Seattle Children's Theatre, celebrating its 20th anniversary, is acknowledged to be a national leader in the development of new scripts. It has mounted shows concerning racial injustice, homeless families, Northwest Native American history, and many other social issues. SCT balances its season with classic tales and new versions of childhood favorites, but it's clearly the topical issues that have earned the theater national attention. *Newsweek* magazine named SCT as one of the top 10 theaters for youth in the United States, and many would narrow that list to a top-five spot. Linda Hartzell, SCT's artistic director, has taken the theater from a position of "cute plays out by the zoo" to a peak as a major theatrical force in the theater-rich Seattle stage scene. The new Charlotte Martin Theatre at the Seattle Center opened last year, giving Puget Sound family audiences a 485-seat, \$12-million, state-of-the-art facility. A new 280-seat second theater opened last week, a \$600,000 remodel of an empty rehearsal hall. The new space is expected to increase SCT's attendance by 100,000 over the next year, with school groups packing the theaters for near-daily student matinees on both stages. Children's theater is clearly big business in Seattle.

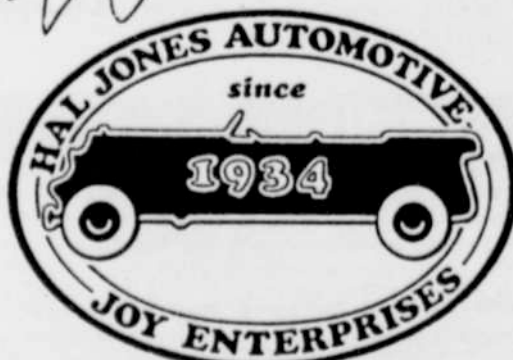
"Would you go all the way to Seattle for a children's play?" might be the next question. In the case of *The Yellow Boat*, the answer is an unqualified yes, especially for any family facing a life-threatening illness. Children have few chances to see serious stories aimed at their age level.



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