



DARCY RUST AND TONY RUST IN SEUSSICAL

OH, THE PLACES YOU'LL GO

Cottage Theatre scores a holiday hit with the Broadway musical *Seussical*

In all honesty, I must admit that I copped quite an attitude before walking into Cottage Theatre's current production of *Seussical*, a Broadway musical based on the work of beloved children's author Dr. Seuss, aka Theodore Geisel. First of all, I absolutely adore Geisel, and not least for his resistance, during his lifetime, to having any of his lovely creations — all those *hunches* and *sneetches* — run through the grinder of crass commercialization and corporate marketing.

Rare among children's writers, Geisel refused to infantilize children, and beneath the playful eccentricity of his language resides a romantic sensibility that bestows an uncommon respect to the imaginative powers of the very young. Couple this with his deeply ethical and somewhat tragic vision of a fallen world, and you've got a powerful antidote to the dunderheaded escapism of so much kids' entertainment.

I like musicals quite a lot, but sometimes it seems Broadway can't keep its glitzy, reductive hands off anything, especially something as sacred and product-pure as Dr. Seuss.

With my heart full of unwashed socks and charming as an eel, I took my seat at Cottage Theatre and, within five minutes of the opening song, I felt my Grinchy heart swell four sizes, at least. This fantastic musical — co-conceived by Monty Python alum Eric Idle — bestows absolute honor on the works of Dr. Seuss, maintaining at once the peculiar joys of his wonky voice and, even more importantly, the pervasive humanity that girds his storytelling.

Directed by Keith Kessler, and featuring a live orchestra, this lush and frenetic production hits every right note, from the acting and choreography (by Janet Rust) to the impressive costumes (Chris Carter, Autumn Carter) and spot-on set design (Janet Whitlow). The story is something of a hodge-podge, taking bits and pieces from Seuss' vast canon, but centered primarily on *Horton Hears a Who!*, about an angelic elephant's endeavors to protect the microscopic residents of Whoville.

The music is surprisingly catchy, and the controlled chaos on stage — slapstick, action, song and dance — evokes a kind of pleasant delirium that replicates the populist fantasias of Seuss' books. Even more impressive, the language — the unmistakable anapestic tetrameter of Geisel's poetic rhythms — is lovingly and respectfully rendered, casting a kind of spell that is somehow fresh and nostalgic at once.

The cast, which is huge and vastly multi-generational (the youngest actor, Anwen Dickinson, is just four!), couldn't be better. Mark Van Beever is downright adorable as the good-hearted Horton (Van Beever is also the show's vocal director); Tony Rust is aptly mischievous as The Cat in the Hat, the show's wacky master of ceremonies; Madison Baker is captivating as Gertrude McFuzz, the sweetly persistent bird who pursues Horton; Autumn Carter gives a great diva turn to the saucy role of Mayzie La Bird; and Darcy Rust is a powerhouse as JoJo, the young boy whose "thinks" represent the free spirit not just of besieged youth, but of us all.

The holiday season, for all its good cheer, tends to produce (and reproduce) a lot of saccharine schmaltz and fluff-spun sentimentality, but this is not so with Cottage Theatre's staging of *Seussical*. In channeling the defiantly joyful soul of Geisel, this show captures something essential in our shared humanity — our individual yearning toward community and goodness that is childlike without being childish.

To quote the master himself, from *The Lorax*: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

Seussical plays 8 pm Thursdays through Saturdays and 2:30 pm Sundays through Dec. 23 at Cottage Theatre. Tickets and info at CottageTheatre.org or 541-942-8001.

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