



Glenda Frank

Elephant and Piggie's "We Are in a Play"

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Script and lyrics by Mo Willems, author of the Elephant and Piggie series. Deborah Wicks La Puma, music.
New Victory Theatre, 209 W. 42 St., NYC.

Jan. 25-Feb. 3, 2017. Sat. at 11 AM, 3 and 7 PM; Sun. 11 AM and 3 PM

Wednesdays & Thursdays at 8pm; Saturdays at 3pm & 8pm;

For tickets and information: call 646-223-3010 or visit the box office or <http://www.newvictory.org/box office>.

by Glenda Frank

"Elephant and Piggie's "We Are in a Play," has come to the New Victory Theatre from the Kennedy Center. The five-person show is based on the award-winning New York Times best-selling series by Mo Willems. The live music (4 musicians in animal-eared fedoras) was written by composer Deborah Wicks La Puma, who specializes in music for children.



(L-R) Evan Casey as Elephant Gerald and Lauren Williams as Piggie
(Credit: Teresa Wood)

On a minimal set with minimal costumes, Gerald the Elephant (the slim Evan Casey) and Piggie (the slim Lauren Williams) enact several skits about being friends: sharing ice cream, what do you do when a friend breaks your new toy, and going to a party together. The various events are based on eight of the two dozen books in the series. The main characters of Piggie complement each other. Elephant Gerald is a worrier, sure that disaster is around the next corner while Piggie is all sunshine, encouraging her friend to take chances and hope for the best.

One of the happiest segments in the one-hour presentation is when Piggie is invited to her first party by the three Squirrelles (Jamie Eacker, who doubles as a funny Delivery Dog, Justine "Icy" Moral, and Jennie Lutz, who doubles as the Ice Cream Penguin). Elephant and Piggie pile layer on layer for a general party (Piggie in a long pink tutu), a formal party (Gerald's top hat and cane), and a beach party (Gerald adds a swimming tube around his waist).

The songs and dances throughout, but especially at the party, are lively and fun. As a matter of fact all the performances are exceptional. The actors are always in the moment, in character, and very endearing. Their energy and musical theatre skills are just right for the audience and the script.

My problem is primarily with the script. I have not read Mo Willems' series although I probably know his work from "Sesame Street," for which he won six Emmy Awards as a writer and animator. He has also worked for Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network as head writer for Codename: Kids Next Door. I found the script too abstract, too demanding of the imaginations of 4-7 year olds.

The opening was pure comedy. Elephant, who can be identified only by an all gray outfit, comes on stage looking for his friend Piggie. He exits and Piggie, all in pink, comes on stage looking for Elephant. Eventually they are both on stage, back to back at times, looking for their friend, surprised and happy when they bump into each other.

Then the script goes cerebral. Kids love villains, who turn out to be good guys, something lost or hidden that the protagonist has to find, or a problem that needs solving. There was a little of this, but as we say in adult theatre, the show had no through line, just disconnected skits.

In the first, Elephant and Piggie are bored so they decide to skip, something kids love. But they want something new, so they add playing ping pong to skipping. (How many kids in the audience know what ping pong is? The gestures on stage would not make it clear.)

Okay. And then they decided to add funny hats -- invisible funny hats. Here were wonderful, missed opportunities for comedy.



(L-R) Lauren Williams, Evan Casey, Brittany Baratz, Deborah Lubega and Ashleigh King (Credit: Teresa Wood)

A second problematic skit is about ice cream. I bet a lot of parents in the audience have advised their children not to lick a friend's ice

cream although sharing chips, gummy bears and grapes is fine. But here was a double skit, one involving green (pistachio) ice cream. The other ended happily, with both of them licking a chocolate cone.

One of my grandsons thought the finest line was when Evan Casey (who played Gerald) ad-libbed that he would have to do this all over again at 11 (AM). I don't know why he found that hilarious and I almost spoiled his fun by explaining that there was another show at 11 the next morning. He ignored me; he wanted to keep enjoying the best joke of the show.



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