

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

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output/weiss/cst-fty-seuss07.html](#)[Print this page](#)**'Seussical': You're sure to like it, Sam I am**

July 7, 2006

BY [HEDY WEISS](#) Theater Critic*The news is this, and I'll say it LOUD -- for Horton, Gertrude and all the crowd:**This "Seussical" is more than pleasing; it's sassy, smart and full of teasing.**In fact, as I will tell you here: The show deserves a big two-fish cheer.**It's shorter now than it was before, and short is good -- it will not bore.**Plus, here's a cast that razzle-dazzles, with whimsy, wit and existential frazzles.**But enough of rhyming for just this minute; I'll turn to prose to go the limit.**And meantime, that anarchic Cat will boogie in his high, striped hat.**And miniature creatures called the Whos can rest assured there'll be no BOOS!*

In a program note for "Seussical" -- which opened Wednesday night at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater in what has become the company's annual mainstage "summer family musical" offering -- the show's creators, Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens (who collaborated with Eric Idle in this adaptation of the works of Dr. Seuss), noted that the piece has had "almost as many lives as the Cat in the Hat."

THEATER REVIEW**'SEUSSICAL, THE MUSICAL'**

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: Through Aug. 20**Where:** Chicago Shakespeare Theater, 800 E. Grand on Navy Pier**Tickets:** \$18-\$23**Phone:** (312) 595-5600

True, and as it happens, this chock-full yet ideally condensed 75-minute version -- playfully directed by Eric Rosen, with spicy choreography by Suzanne Viverito, strong musical direction by Doug Peck and a slew of zesty performers -- is leaps and bounds beyond the Broadway edition and winning in its intimacy.

The tip-off comes as soon as you enter the theater. Onstage (for the first time in my memory of the show) are giant books bearing such Seussian titles as *Fox in Socks*, *The Cat's Quizzes*, *Oh Say Can You Say?*, *On Beyond Zebra*, *If I Ran the Circus* and more. This is the ideal gateway to the show, just as a crazy, off-kilter castle lurks in the distance.

Then comes the matter of mischief. Although this production still doesn't take the material to the wildest, giddiest, most dangerous extremes of nonsensicality and misbehavior that is the green eggs and ham of most Seuss readers, it goes further in that direction than most previous efforts. Just check out the way the Cat in the Hat (the richly jazzy and sardonic E. Faye Butler) makes her entrance, and begins to conduct the onstage band, naughtily wagging her tail to the beat, and getting the storytelling off to a fine comic start.

From there it's on to meet the Cat's "collaborator" -- the wide-eyed Boy (Mitchell Hollis, most engaging with his perfect diction and matter-of-fact personality). This is a fellow who can travel the seven seas by just sitting in his bathtub and letting his imagination set sail. (The bathtub scene, conjured with little more than some cobalt-blue silk, is a delight.)

Yet the heart of this musical tale concerns Horton the Elephant (Bernie Yvon, easily charming as the sweet-natured soul at once naive and full of deep thoughts). Horton is determined to save all life, especially the Whos, the nearly invisible creatures whose elusiveness makes him something of a laughingstock. Yet when it comes time for romance, Horton is all but oblivious, and that leaves Gertrude McFuzz (Brandy McClendon), the small, short-tailed bird who is madly in love with him (and a bit short on self-esteem) decidedly up a tree.

McClendon, a small, quick, goofy and altogether enchanting comedienne, flat-out flies away with the show, whether she's singing about her tail-change surgery, pleading her case of unrequited love or finally arriving, full feather, as a sex object. She's a hoot, but will be with the show only until July 23, after which she will be replaced by the very talented if quite different Johanna McKenzie Miller.

The truly subversive story line in all this concerns the flashier, more promiscuous bird, Mayzie (Alexandra Billings, who brings her great comic energy to bear at every turn). Mayzie inconveniently lays an egg, convinces Horton to keep it warm, and then flies off to party, essentially abandoning her baby.

Berwick Haynes, Travis Turner and Devin DeSantis are the Wickershams, the very stylish monkey vaudevillians; Becca McCoy is the strong-voiced Sour Kangaroo; Rebecca Finnegan is the blowsy Mrs. Mayor, and Melanie Brezill and Ericka Mac are chorus birds.

Hand and finger puppets and flying fish add to the kingdom of joy, with designers Robert Andrew Kovach, Diane Ferry Williams, Janice Pytel and James Savage conjuring a colorful landscape.

There is something here for both adults and children. And of course there's a big "YUP," too.

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